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Luo ancestor veneration and the Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints: Toward The development of an African Christian theology of ancestors

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Luo ancestor veneration and the Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints: Toward the Development of an African Christian theology of ancestors

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This monograph examines the belief of the Luo people of Kenya about their ancestors in light of the Christian doctrine of Communion of Saints. The objective of the study is to discover ways by which the veneration of African ancestors can be understood as similar to the belief in the Christian doctrine of Communion of Saints. Furthermore, this monograph seeks to suggest creative ways by which an African ancestral framework can become a point of departure for promoting an authentic engagement between the Gospel of Christ and the indigenous African cultures in developing an African Christian theology of ancestors.

A brief background of the monograph may be described as follows. *Communio sanctorum*, the tripartite Church of the living, the Church in purgatory, and the triumphant Church in heaven, can be compared to the relationship of African peoples with their ancestors, with God, and with nature. The monograph begins with a study of the origins and theological foundations of the *communio sanctorum*. It then uses the methodologies of qualitative research and social historical research to examine the Luo funeral rituals in order to study the ancestor cults and ancestor veneration that pervade the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa. The ancestral beliefs and practices have been construed as both obstacles to the Gospel and preambles to it. In studying the Luo funeral rites, we glean the Luo's attachment to their ancestors. Furthermore, the funeral rites demonstrate the Luo belief that death is basic to the understanding of the significance of their ancestors. The Luo perform the funeral rituals together with other cultural rites to ensure the incorporation of their deceased kin into the ancestral world. The Luo believe that the ancestors, although deceased, remain a part of the community. The ancestors have such a resilient and pervasive role in life and thought of the Luo that a Luo Christian is inclined to think of his ancestor as being with God in the same manner that a canonized saint is believed to dwell

in the courts of God. There are also similarities between the Luo people and other African ethnic groups; in fact we can apply some of the major observations and conclusions from the Luo to the other African peoples in order to draw important conclusions for a Christian theology of African ancestors.

Early Christian missionaries discouraged African funeral rituals (and many other African traditional customs) and encouraged Christian burial rites. However, Christian rituals alone fail to satisfy the cultural and spiritual needs of the African Christian believers. Consequently the African Christian believers very often publicly assent to orthodox Christian beliefs and join in the denunciations of the ancestor rites, but privately retain their loyalty to their indigenous traditions. Their traditions affords them the means by which they can live in communion with their ancestors whose commemoration they have always regarded as indispensable and beneficial or even redemptive for their earthly existence. This dual or multi-faith practice is a spiritual dilemma that if unexamined may become a problem that stifles the spiritual development of African Christians, weakens the entire enterprise of evangelization and could in the long run hamper the growth of authentic Christian faith. In this study I argue that African ancestral veneration is on par with *communio sanctorum*. Moreover, since African ancestral beliefs and practices are fundamental pillars of religion for many ethnic groups in Africa, I propose that we use them to open up broad possibilities for defining pastoral strategies responsive to the African Christian believers' spiritual needs. The monograph ends by proposing that if Christianity is to become firmly rooted in the rich African spiritual traditions, certain theological parameters must be delineated to enable African Christians to relate their ancestral beliefs to the salvific work of Christ. Ancestral beliefs and practices can therefore be viewed through a single theological lens that serves as a hermeneutical tool for critiquing Western and Christian hegemonic forces as well as responding to the cultural legacies of colonialism and of imperialism.

This dissertation by Thomas Ochieng Otanga fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Spiritual Theology approved by Dr. James A. Wiseman, PhD, as Director and by Dr. Raymond Studzinski, PhD, and Dr. Robert Schreiter, PhD, as Readers.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Statement of the problem and background of the study

Ancestor cults and ancestor veneration pervade the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa. These African religious and cultural practices that focus on remembering, honoring and loving the ancestors play a significant role in the lives of the majority of Africans, including African Christians.

Since Christianity spread during the colonial period, critics have observed that Christianity did not create an environment for its co-existence with the African cultures. Africa is known for its many religious ceremonies and rituals. While Africans see their ceremonies and rituals as grounded in the traditions of their ancestors, and therefore sacred aspects of their lives, missionary Christianity tended to brand those ceremonies and rituals as paganism that had to be rooted out to clear the way for Christianity. African cultural practices were often condemned because they were considered to be heathen, evil, superstitious, and full of heretical beliefs which led African believers to deviate from sound Christian beliefs and practices.

An important aspect of the dynamics of the encounter between Christianity and the African cultures that was not sufficiently attended to and acknowledged explicitly was that African cultures were the containers of African religions and philosophy. African society is always governed by rules and principles based on ancestral traditions, languages, and ways of life—a set of cultural values which reflect an African's distinctive character and personality. To condemn African cultures, or how those cultures are expressed in real life situations, is by implication to condemn African people's cultural values that reflect their distinctiveness and

personalities, their wisdom, insights and values that have informed their lives from past generations.

The ordinary and universal Magisterium has left room for a systematic development of a theology of ancestors. As we shall see in this study, in 1935 the bishops of Africa and Madagascar issued a document which many African theologians have found stimulating and which has not always been given sufficient attention: "Forbid customs which attribute to the dead powers over the living; accept signs of respect and thanksgiving directed toward the dead. No currently existing custom is formally forbidden as such, with the understanding that all customs are to evolve in a Christian direction."[1] In more recent times Pope John Paul II, in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, insightfully remarked and asked: "[Africans] believe intuitively that the dead continue to live and remain in communion with them. Is this not in some way *a preparation for belief in the Communion of the Saints?*"[2] Scholars have called on the Church to re-evaluate its doctrines and identify how certain traditional African traditions and customs can be incorporated into Christianity. These insights open up broad possibilities for defining pastoral strategies responsive to the African's spiritual dilemma.

As a test-case for how we can see the Africans' attachment to their ancestors and some of the ritual practices that convey the social, cultural, and religious significance of their traditional heritage, I have chosen to examine the funeral rituals of the Luo people, a Nilotic group who live mostly in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. The Luo believe that the ancestors, although deceased, remain a part of the community and can be punitive, benevolent or simply capricious. The

[1] Cited in Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books; London: G. Chapman, 1988), 38.
[2] John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 43.

ancestors have such a resilient and pervasive role in life and thought that the Luo Christian is inclined to think of his ancestor as being with God in the same manner that a canonized saint is believed to dwell in the courts of God.

Christian missionaries discouraged some of the Luo funeral rituals and encouraged Christian burial rites, but Christian rituals alone fail to satisfy the cultural and spiritual needs of the Luo people. Consequently many Luo publicly assent to orthodox Christian beliefs and join in the denunciations of the ancestor rites, but privately retain their loyalty to their indigenous traditions. This is a problem that stifles the spiritual development of Luo Christians, causes uneasiness in the entire Luo society, and could in the long run hamper the growth of authentic Christian faith.

If Christianity is to thrive amidst the rich Luo spiritual traditions, there is a need to delineate certain theological parameters within which Luo Christians may relate their ancestral beliefs to the salvific work of Christ. The considerations of the Luo traditional customs and practices will, in some way, be applied to other African people's beliefs and practices that center on the veneration of African ancestors. Consequently the observations and conclusions from the Luo will help to establish a hermeneutical framework for developing an African Christian theology of ancestors.

The ancestral practices and beliefs examined in this work were part of what the missionaries and Western culture neglected, ridiculed, paid little attention to, undermined, or issued wholesale condemnation of. One of the consequences of rejection of African rituals and cultural practices was that African ancestral traditions, challenged by the new dominant Christian religious culture, tended to wither away under pressure from both western and Christian cultures. Many Africans readily accepted the Christian faith without questioning or criticizing the new

(Christian) faith they were embracing. They quickly took names of canonized Christian saints to symbolize both their entry into the family of God (the Church) and break with their African ancestral cultural heritage. Missionary Christianity reigned in the minds of African Christian believers with a force that made them downplay the importance of their traditional beliefs and practices that formerly gave them their distinct identity as Africans. That is why some critics have charged that Christian evangelization in Africa is a factor that contributed in the erosion of most of the African traditional beliefs and practices.

However, some cultural beliefs and practices, such as the ones that center on ancestral veneration, were never completely eroded. African Christians continued to regard their ancestral traditional practices as fundamental pillars upon which God's favors reached them. Belief that the ancestors are alive played active and prominent roles in the lives of all African peoples in spite of their new Christian faith and of the Western negative depiction of the ancestral cultural heritage. Although the ancestral beliefs and practices lived on through colonialism and missionary Christianity, if the pertinent cultures that supported them were significantly altered, then we may expect that the structures that supported such ancestral cults, or aided the full expression of African cultures, were either weakened or eroded altogether.

Some African Christian believers, however, challenged the missionaries' approaches and insistence that conversion to Christianity and the adoption of Western culture were inseparable. Thus, they accepted Christian faith but chose to incorporate some African beliefs and practices to give full expression to their new Christian faith. This study considers the tensions between such African Christian believers and the missionaries as a reason that led to the establishment of African Independent Churches (AICs). Furthermore, those tensions viewed as counter-hegemonic forces to missionary Christianity serve not only to offer alternative ways by which

African Christians can express themselves as a local Church in Africa, but also to highlight the need for a thoroughgoing study of inculturation and other contextual theologies for the development of an African Christian theology of ancestors.

Through the study of the Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints and the Luo funeral rituals, I seek to show that African ancestors have a resilient and pervasive role in the spiritual lives of African people. I hope to illustrate in this study that African Christians' veneration of their ancestors empowers African believers' search for and communion with God and God's people, and that African ancestors may adequately serve as a preamble to the appropriation of the Christian doctrine of Communion of Saints.

Divisions of the study

This study is divided into four main parts. Each part contains three chapters. In the first part, I examine the theological principles of the Communion of Saints. This part consists of a theological examination of how Christians maintain a healthy relationship with the saints. It particularly stresses the practices of remembrance and mutual intercession within the community of the Church. In the cult of the saints, the Christian saints act as intermediaries between God and the Christian believers. In an apparently similar way, in many African societies the ancestors are integral to the traditional African social structure and serve the needs of the living as intermediaries between God and themselves. The conclusions from the first part are vital for understanding the cultural and theological significance of African ancestors in the subsequent parts.

In the second part, I examine the Luo cultural beliefs and practices of maintaining healthy relationships between the living and the dead. This second part aims to examine these beliefs and

practices in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how the Luo people conceive of the life now experienced by their ancestors. The data from the primary and secondary sources elicit information regarding the *why* and *how* of the Luo funerary rituals.

In the third part, I consider the Luo ancestors as a preamble to the belief in the Communion of Saints. I apply the data from my observations and interviews to examine the possibility of affirming an analogical relationship between the role of the ancestors in the Luo community and the role of Christian saints in the community of the Church.

In the fourth part, I draw a synthesis. I present a hypothetical picture of a Luo Christian who is at home both in his Luo funerary cultural heritage and in his Christian faith by relating the findings of Parts II and III to the theological principles elucidated in Part I. The objective is to guarantee a secure place for the Luo ancestors in the Christian faith and enable the Luo to participate meaningfully in the salvific work of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, in this final part, I offer my own conclusions on the question of whether the African veneration of ancestors can indeed promote an inculturated understanding of the Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints. I do this by highlighting a role that an indigenous African ancestral theology would play as a contextual African theology that has a postcolonial and reconstructionist agenda. I end the study by proposing that since ancestors have such a resilient and pervasive role in life and thought of the African Christian believers, African ancestral beliefs and practices can become a point of departure from which an indigenous African theology can emerge.

Methodology

A combination of both primary and secondary sources is used in this study to achieve its aims more effectively. The first, third and fourth parts of the study are based on scholarly secondary materials which I analyze, evaluate, and critique.

The research strategy adopted for the second part of the study was a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in a complementary manner. I gathered statistical data from Bondo and South Nyanza locations in the western side of Kenya, which are well-recognized as Luo countries. I observed funeral rituals and carried out interviews which were both structured and unstructured in nature. Lengthy spontaneous and casual conversations and chitchats also became important ways of gathering information. Additional data for the section were also found in archival scholarly literature. The analysis of the data in this section is a dialectical one in which I analyze cultural distinctions to make sense of emic ideas and practices through analytic constructions based on theoretical frameworks of renowned scholars.

Another methodological point I need to mention regards the process. This study is basically descriptive and analytical. I describe and analyze the doctrine of the Communion of Saints in order to establish its historical developments and theological value. I then describe the Luo funeral rituals in order to gain a deeper understanding of Luo philosophical and religious assumptions through their cultural beliefs and practices. This process leads me to make certain observations and conclusions about African ancestral beliefs and practices, to identify points of convergence or divergence, and to analyze their significance for proposing an African Christian theology of ancestors.

Sources and bibliography

I employed a wide range of sources for this study. These sources are comprised of the Bible, Council documents, papal documents, dictionaries, encyclopedias, books, journal articles, dissertations, and magazines. In addition to these sources, I consulted electronic sources, mainly Internet websites. These secondary materials are readily available in various libraries.

Sources that deal particularly with the Luo culture and religion are scarce. However, as will be evident in this study, there is a sufficient body of literature on Luo history, culture, and religion to meet the goals of this study.

Contribution and originality

No major work has addressed and developed the Luo concept of ancestral life as a starting point and a means of providing an inculturated understanding of the Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints. It is my sincere hope that this study will provide a foundation for further work aimed at developing and preserving genuine elements of African spiritual traditions in an authentic process of evangelization.

PART ONE

THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Introduction

This part consists of an examination of how Christians maintain a healthy relationship with the saints. It will particularly stress the practices of remembrance and mutual intercession within the community of the Church.

In the cult of the saints, the Christian saints act as intermediaries between God and the Christian believers. In an apparently similar way, in many African societies, the ancestors are integral to the traditional African social structure and serve the needs of the living as intermediaries between God and the living.

Through the study of the Christian doctrine of communion of saints and the Luo funeral rituals, I seek to show that African ancestors have a resilient and pervasive role in the spiritual lives of African people. I therefore propose that African Christians' veneration of their ancestors empowers Africans' search for God and that the veneration of African ancestors may be considered as similar to the Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints.

In order to present the doctrine of the *communion of saints* it will not suffice to study the doctrine theologically as a given in faith, or simply as an aspect of religious principle. Rather, it is imperative that we also study it sociologically within the context of the changing complex religious terrains of Graeco-Roman society and Jewish cultural and religious traditions. My first task therefore is to examine the social and religious environment of the Christian believers who

inherited the understanding of and desire for “communion” from the traditions of martyrdom in the Old Testament.

In this first I part will gather the various sociological and theological ideas which form the basis of the doctrine. I will therefore provide a concise description of the larger historical perspective from which the *communion of saints* may be viewed. This description will enable me to locate the theological and spiritual currents that were operative in the early centuries of the Church. Furthermore, this description will help situate the doctrine of Communion of Saints in its social, theological, and historical location.

Since the cult of the saints had its origins in the veneration of the martyrs, it is important to begin this section with an investigation of the manner in which martyrs were considered by their contemporaries in the Jewish cultural and religious settings. Consequently I shall describe certain aspects of martyrdom in the early Christian centuries. Studying the expressions of martyrdom in this historical and cultural context will help clarify Jewish language, thoughts, and cultural practices before Christianity, and show how these were absorbed into Christian religious attitudes and how believers in the age of the Christian martyrs prioritized their own religious truths and determined what was worthy of sacrificing their lives for.

I will describe the historically contingent and changing perspectives that the early Christian writers and eminent Church persons took regarding the afterlife. By demonstrating that a distinctive identity was generated around the hope of a spiritual fellowship with the martyrs, it will be possible to show in the second part of this study that ancestor veneration by the Luo people is not a negative doctrinal reaction but a harmonious development in the continuum that

takes full advantage of the Church's rich history and the reforms advocated by the Second Vatican Council.

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 A CONCISE DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF SAINTHOOD BEFORE CHRISTIANITY

1.1 The anthropological and eschatological aspects of the cult of the saints

The Christian understanding and attainment of holiness, or union with God, has taken various forms through the life of the church.[1] In practical terms, for Christian believers attaining holiness has always implied sharing in the holiness of God, which corresponds to the Pauline sense of saints as members of a community in Eucharistic fellowship as the Body of Christ.

The distinct historical and complex character of the communion of saints has been studied very extensively by various scholars. Sainthood in a strict sense has been circumscribed by Catholic Christianity through a formal canonization process and rigorous control of cult. Although a discussion of the rise of cult of "saints" in historic Christianity is beyond the scope of this study, I must provide some of the theological presuppositions that led to the emergence of the *communion of saints* with its various manifestations.

Saints are honored in Catholic Christianity because the faithful recognize their supernatural excellence based on the belief that they are in heaven. Moreover, the faithful believe that the saints intercede for the living and for those in purgatory. The faithful perform many rituals in venerating and invoking the saints (as we shall see in this study).

[1] More details can be found in Elizabeth Johnson's study of the Communion of Saints where she has traced the Jewish roots of the "The One Holy God" and shown how the biblical idea of divine holiness functions to include all believers. See her *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 50-58.

These include praise and imitation of the saints' virtues, private and public invocation, and taking their names.

The word "saint" comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, which may mean "holy". Many authors have described the general manner in which the "holy" ones were described in the scriptures before "saint" became deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition. Lawrence Cunningham, for example, has analyzed three ways in which αγιοσ ("saint") is used: (i) the faithful ones who lived before the time of Christ (Mt, 27:52), (ii) the members of the new covenant in Christ Jesus (Phil 1:1), (iii) as a synonym for Christian faithful (Rom 1:7, Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1).[2]

Cunningham further provides a broad spectrum on which we may begin a systematic understanding of the saints. From his analysis of the Christian tradition he lists four categories under which the word "saint" is ordinarily applied: (i) godly people; (ii) those blessed ones who are in heaven; (iii) those persons publicly recognized for their holiness by the process of canonization in the Catholic Church; and (iv) the justified as understood in the New Testament.[3]

"Saints" as was applied in the expression *communion of saints* had a complex and intricate beginning that some authors claim may be traced from the cult of saints that was part of popular Western European culture long before the birth of Christ. Stephen Wilson, for example, has highlighted voices that claim "the cult of saints was of pagan origins." Wilson has also described the arguments given for such claims, including the fact that

[2] Lawrence Cunningham, *The Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Saints" p. 925
[3] Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 62.

pagan sites and festivals were Christianized through the cult of saints.[4] Hippolyte Delahaye has studied the rites and symbols that are common to Christianity and to ancient religions, including "superstitious practices," incubation, collections of miracles, and literal borrowings from pagan sources.[5] One of the questions of interest to this study is: what lessons has the Church learned from the pagan survivals of rites and symbols that shaped Christian attitudes and beliefs? Are there certain features of triumphalism in the identity of the Church that prevents it from entering into meaningful dialogue with non-Christian religions? We shall take up these questions in other parts of this study for analysis and subsequent proposals for actions.

In the early days of Christianity's contact with the secular world, the cultural and spiritual atmosphere favored the survival of elements of secular culture within Christianity, as will become clear in this study. But the definite identity that marked Christianity's existence and growth was a combination of complex factors. A useful place to begin our study is with Christianity's belief and vision for the future.

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[4] Stephen Wilson, ed., *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2. Wilson cites two examples: (i) The shrine of Saints Cosmas and Damian at Cyrhuss in Syria which became famous from the fifth century was a continuation of a site previously devoted to Asclepius. The same site was believed to have belonged to the heavenly twins of Greek mythology Castor and Pollux; (ii) Constantine stopped the pagan practices at the temple of Poseidon in Constantinople and dedicated the temple to St Minas.

[5] Hippolyte Delahaye, *Legend of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography*, (tr. V. M. Corawford) (New York, Bombay, Calcutta: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), 148-213. Incubation was practiced especially in the sanctuaries of Aesculapius (the god of healing in Greek religion), Amphiaraus (the son of Oecles and Hypermnestra, and husband of Eriphyle in Greek mythology), and Serapis (Graeco-Egyptian god who was invented during the 3rd century BC at the orders of Ptolemy I of Egypt as a means to unify the Greeks and Egyptians in his realm). The Church preserved incubation for many centuries. A devotee would sleep in the temple according to certain prescribed ceremonies so that he would be favored by apparition of the divinity, a revelation of the future, or the healing of a disease. See Delahaye, *Legend of the Saints*, 151-152.

1.2 Christian believers' eschatological hope

The early periods of Christianity were marked by varying and sometimes opposing views of eschatology. Christian hope was perceived as a dialectic between history and eschatology, between two seemingly conflicting fulfillments. On the one hand, Christians believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. On the other hand, Christians looked forward to the glorious return of Jesus, which would usher in an eschatological messianic era and subsequently put an end to all trials and persecutions.

Christian faith was caught up in these tensions of the "already" and "not yet."[6] Christian hope was ultimately centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians viewed eschatology having been accomplished by the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. At the same time Christians were consciously aware of history's movement toward God's redemptive presence to be brought to the fullness of perfection in the world to come. This futurist approach to eschatology gave rise to an active and widespread hope that Christ would return to judge the living and the dead.

Furthermore, Christ's judgment would be based on the performance of every believer. Christians' devotional practices were aimed at securing special rapport with the saints. These devotional practices actually expressed a need for communion (or spiritual fellowship) since the term was applied to all the baptized and to the faithful departed. We

[6] The so-called "Kingdom theologians" have discussed this eschatological framework since the mid-twentieth century. Its essence lies in the analysis that Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God by his earthly ministry, passion, death, and resurrection. And so the Kingdom is already present. However, the Kingdom is yet to be consummated in the future new heaven and new earth in order to be fully present. It follows that Christian believers have experienced Christ's salvation in the present in anticipation of a future salvation based on their works. For a detailed discussion of this expression see Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*: *The primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, (trans. Floyd V. Filson) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964).

find a kaleidoscope of opinions regarding the afterlife since the entire period seems to have been overshadowed by thoughts about the destiny of the humankind.[7]

Literary and artistic works from the early periods of the Church indicate that the final destiny of humankind was a major preoccupation for writers and artists. Joseph Laffin in his study of Christian depictions of Last Judgment, for example, tells us that the earliest surviving Christian art comes largely from the Roman Catacombs.[8] The artistic works in the catacombs are the product of reflections on early Christians' eschatological beliefs. The first century anonymous epistle attributed to Barnabas, for example, talks of how believers would be rewarded according to how righteous or evil they would be found at the time of judgment.[9]

A century after the Epistle of Barnabas, when Christianity entered a new phase of encounter with Judaism and paganism, *Shepherd of Hermas* expressed a more refined theological outlook regarding the return of Jesus. *Hermas* described how the wicked would be condemned to eternal destruction while the righteous would continue to live in God's eternal joy and in the company of angels as a reward for their trials and sufferings.

As time went by and Christ did not return during the lifetime of many believers as was expected, the one urgent question that preoccupied the minds of the remaining believers was: what would happen to those who died with the hope of resurrection? The

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[7] A comprehensive survey of early Christian writings regarding the afterlife can be found in Zachary Hayes, *Visions of A Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier , 1986); Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); William J. La Due, *The Trinity Guide to Eschatology* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

[8] Josephine Laffin, "What Happened to the Last Judgment in the Early Church?" in *The Church, the Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul: papers read at the 2007 summer meeting and the 2008 winter meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. Peter Clark and Tony Claydon (Saffron Walden: Ecclesiastical History Society, 2009), 21-2.

[9] Barnabas, *Epistle of Barnabas* (Charleston, SC: Createspace, 2009).

urgency of this question was intensified by the spiritual environment in which Gnostics had planted their assertion that the soul passed straight to heaven immediately after death.

To this question several Christian teachers and writers gave their eschatological beliefs, which were representative of the main Christian thinking of their times. Justin, for example, taught that Jesus would not only return in glory, but would go to Jerusalem where the Jews who dishonored him would recognize him. There in Jerusalem, Justin taught, Jesus would eat and drink with his disciples and would begin a reign of a thousand years.[10] Irenaeus and Tertullian agreed with this basic theological view, but added that the souls of the dead went to the underworld immediately after death. In that underworld the sinful would receive a foretaste of their future condemnation while the just would be consoled with the expectation of resurrection. These two teachers made an important exception: martyrs attained the full joys of heaven at death.[11]

Despite the inconsistencies and the varying expressions of eschatological beliefs in patristic eschatology, there was an overriding emphasis on the hope of resurrection and ultimate communion of all the virtuous.

As the Church entered the age of persecution, Christian martyrs were accorded a special place in the Christian faith because they refused to compromise their belief in the One God as revealed in Jesus Christ. By the end of the second century, prominent voices of the Church not only asserted the special place of the martyr but also taught that martyrdom was the only way in which a soul could immediately attain the joys of heaven

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[10] Justin, *Apology*, 1.52.

[11] Michael Perham, *The Communion of Saints: An Examination of the Place of the Christian Dead in the Belief, Worship, and Calendars of the Church* (London: SPCK, 1980), 2.

free from sin.[12] It is therefore necessary to highlight some important developments to show why the martyr was a special member of Christ's body. First, a historical analysis is in order.

1.3 Some pre-Christian Saints and Martyrs

A descriptive analysis of the major developments that shaped the mind of the Church in the formation of the doctrine of "communion of saints" takes us back to certain outstanding persons in the Old Testament. Gerard Rouwhorst in his study of the cult of the Maccabean brothers and their mother writes: "Several Eastern and Western traditions have venerated a number of saints who were pre-Christian and never embraced specifically Christian beliefs."[13]

When we consider the genesis of martyrdom and how martyrs took a central place in the faith system of Christian believers, Rouwhorst's statement raises many questions which are very relevant for this present study. Most importantly, three questions come to the fore: (i) When did Christian believers begin to recognize Christian martyrs? (ii) What made the martyrs appeal to the believers? (iii) What was the nature of the relationship between the Christian believers and the martyrs?

Rouwhorst's study found that the fourth-century Armenian liturgical calendar provided detailed and reliable information regarding the liturgical traditions of Christians

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[12] There were varied emphases from the Christian teachers, but all were agreed that martyrdom was the key to eternal life. I will describe the spiritual aspects of martyrdom and provide more details later in this study.

[13] Gerard Rouwhorst, "The Cult of the Seven Maccabean Brothers and their Mother in Christian Tradition" in *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*, Marcel Poorthius and Joshua Schartz (eds.), (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2004), 183.

living in Jerusalem at the end of the fourth century and during the fifth century.[14] This calendar contained names of pre-Christian Jewish "saints" including Jeremiah (1 May), the prophet Zachariah (10 June), Elisha (14 June), Isaiah (6 July), the Maccabean Brothers (1 August) and David (25 December).

The Christian cult of the Maccabean Brothers has received considerable scholarly attention.[15] The cult is of importance to this study because the veneration of their relics in the tombs located in Armenian cities ushered in a new dimension of spiritual relationship with the dead as never before developed in Christian religious practices. Let us begin by exploring the concept of martyrdom.

The Greek term *μαρτυσ* means witness. In Christian theology, the death of the martyr was significant both for the martyr and the larger society. A martyr was a special witness of the integrity and superiority of Christianity. Martyrdom served as a powerful testimony to the truth of the claims of the Christian church. In order to understand martyrdom in early Christianity, first we need to look at the concept of martyrdom in Jewish religious tradition.

Scripture scholars see correspondence between Jewish martyrdoms and early Christian martyrdoms in the common motifs and practices of these two traditions of martyrdom.[16] Harold Frend, for example, has explored the old and new literature on

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[14] Rouwhorst, "The Cult of the Seven Maccabean Brothers and their Mother in Christian Tradition," 183.

[15] Most notably M. Schaktin, "The Maccabean martyrs" *VigChr* 28 (1974), 97 – 113 and C. Rampolla, "Martyre et Sépulture des Maccabées" in *Reveu de l'Art christen* 42 (1899), 290 – 305.

[16] Jan Bremmer, for example, has written on the issues of continuity between martyrdom traditions in the Jewish and the early Christian martyrdoms. See J.N. Bremmer, "The Atonement in the Interactions of Jews, Greeks, and Christians" in *Sacred History and Sacred Texts in Early Judaism: A Sympossium in Honour of A.S. van der Woude* (eds. J. N. Bremmer and F. García Martínez); (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992), 75-93; Jan Willem van Henten has also analyzed how the books of Daniel and the Maccabees have been interpreted as martyrdoms by early Christians. See his "Reception of Daniel 3 and 6 and the Maccabeean

martyrdom to show the mindset of those who suffered persecution as well as the motivation of those who persecuted them. Frend has shown the critical importance for early Christians of Jewish ideas as influenced heavily by the story of Daniel and the trauma of the revolt of the Maccabeans. His argument that the Christian concept of martyrdom can best be understood if seen as springing from its Jewish roots is pertinent to this study.[17] Three questions are may be pursued at this point.

First, why did the martyrs embrace martyrdom? What was their motivation? There are many reasons as to the motives for martyrdom, but one that is relevant to this study is that martyrdom was seen as a sacrifice in which the believers expiated their sins. Pobee's observations seem to agree with the point of view when he points out that in late Judaism, suffering, whether in the sense of martyrdom or any other form, could atone for sins. Pobee cites two texts from Maccabees to show the ways in which sufferings had atoning efficacy: (i) The fifth of the seven brothers in 2 Maccabees told the king that "We suffer these things for ourselves, having sinned against God" (2 Macc. 7.18, 32, 33; Wisd. 3.5); (ii) The last of the seven brothers says, "In me and my brothers, the wrath of

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Martyrdoms in the Hebrews 11:33-38" in *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity: Studies in the History of Religions in Honor of Jan N. Bremmer* (eds. Jitse Dijkstra, Justine Kroesen, and Yme Kuper) (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010), 365-377.

[17] W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict From the Maccabees to Donatus* (New York: Doubleday, 1967). Ch. 1-3.

The story of the seven brothers and their mother who were tortured and killed under Antiochus (Epiphanes) IV because of their staunch support of the Torah is well known from the books of Maccabees. See 4 Macc. 17:9-10; 4 Macc. 5-18; 2 Macc. 6 - 7. Furthermore Robert Doran has suggested 4 Macc. 17:10-11 as appropriate epitaph for their tombs: "Here lie buried an aged priest and an aged woman and seven sons, because of the violence of the tyrant who wished to destroy the way of life of the Hebrews. They vindicated their nation, looking to God and enduring torture even to death." Robert Doran, "The Martyr: A Synoptic View of the Mother and Her Seven Sons," in *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms,* ed John Collins and George Nickelsburg (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1980), 189-221.

Almighty, which is justly brought upon our nation, may cease" (2 Macc. 7.8).[18] The Maccabeean martyrs provide us with a window through which we see that they died to safeguard their integrity as a covenanted people of God, as individuals, and as a nation. The valedictory speech of Mattathias' exhortation to the Maccabean martyrs summarizes this idea: "Now, therefore my sons, be ye zealous for the law, and give your lives for the covenant of your fathers" (1 Macc. 2.50).

Pobee's observation brings us to the second question: was martyrdom peculiar to the Christians? Many studies show that martyrdom was not at all peculiar to the Christians. It did not emerge from the first centuries of Christianity. It had been in the making within the Greek and Roman worlds as can be seen in the account of the Maccabean martyrs that illustrates the Jewish antecedents of Christian martyrdom.[19] Pobee makes it clearer when he says "The Church was not the first to experience opposition and attack. Judaism, the matrix in which Christianity was born, had her full share of sufferings."[20] De Lacy O'Leary adds a new perspective. He notes that "contemporary paganism showed great honor toward those who suffered death for their

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[18] Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, 34-35.

[19] Geoffrey Ernest Maurice De Ste. Croix's study on the "Jewish antecedents of Christian Martyrdom" highlights (i) the memory of the martyrs; (ii) the notion of special rewards for those who die their faith; (iii) the Church as the new 'Israel of God'; (iv) many spiritual terminologies such as *athletes* as a special designation for a martyr or a confessor; (v) Christian attitudes, such as voluntary martyrdom. See his *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). E. Lohse (in his *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*) arguing for pre-Christian origins of martyrdom connects early Christian martyrology to Palestinian and Jewish martyrology. Lohse argues that two Hellenistic Jewish texts, *2* and *4 Maccabees*, are indebted to Palestinian Judaism. John S. Pobee submits that although Lohse fails to prove that 2 and 4 Maccabees have pre-Christian, Palestinian, Jewish origins, the earliest examples of vicarious deaths of the martyrs are found in these two texts. See his *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, (Journal for the Study of New Testament Supplement Series, no. 6) (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985), 34-40.

[20] Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, 13.

convictions."[21] James Bowman's study of history of "Honor" in the Western world supports this view when he says that "loyalty to the corporate entity, and a willingness to subordinate one's individual inclinations to the greater good [was] regarded as honorable. . . . The older and the essentially pagan idea of honor survived long into Christian era."[22] The foundations and the concept of martyrdom were already ingrained in the cultural milieu. In fact Laffin tells us that "there is a consensus among art historians that the artists who worked in the [Roman] catacombs drew on and adopted well-known pagan images."[23] It was a phenomenon that had a complex social and religious history, one that resonated through the hearts of the believers. It is this resonance that encompassed the religious sentiments of the people and made martyrs such a privileged lot.

Alan Segal, in his study of the social backgrounds to the martyrdoms in the book of Daniel and Qumran, suggests that the death of saints (or holy ones) was a commonplace phenomenon. He submits that the writers of the Book of Daniel adopted "a very popular idea in the Ancient Near East" in response to the age-old question as to why the righteous suffer— "the notion of resurrection as a reward for martyrs and saints."[24]

Segal's insight brings us to yet another question: what final end did the martyrs hope for? In Judaism the martyrs looked to life beyond physical death.[25] Although traditional Judaism, which provided the bedrock of faith for the early century Christians, believed that death was not the end of human existence, an afterlife was not

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[21] De Lacy O'Leary, *The Saints of Egypt* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1937), 12.

[22] James Bowman, *Honor: A History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), 4-45.

[23] Josephine Laffin, "What Happened to the Last Judgment in the Early Church?", 22.

[24] Alan Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 292.

[25] The Book of Daniel was the first to make an unequivocal statement of the doctrine of resurrection. See Dan. 12:2: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt."

systematically and clearly spelled out.[26] The martyrs could hope for rewards in the afterlife; however, the nature of the rewards is spoken about only in vague and scattered ways. According to Pobee's interpretation, Daniel 7:22 implies that martyrs "will be exalted to share in the messianic age"; in Wisdom 3:5 the saints "will be greatly rewarded: for God had proved them and found them worthy for himself."[27] These texts give us a glimpse of the believers regarding the eschatological fate that awaited the martyrs. Moreover, the practice of the martyrs' contemporaries, to preserve the memories of the martyrs, is a factor worth considering at this point. The society was proud to acclaim the sacrifices of their spiritual heroes by immortalizing the martyrs through feast days and by erecting tombs over their graves. In these practices the society also implicitly expressed its faith in immortality.[28] Henten's study clarifies the witness of the martyrs in Daniel and Maccabees: "They did not receive God's ultimate promise given with Christ, but they will be rewarded with the believers in Christ when salvation comes."[29]

1.4 Martyrdom in the early Church

When scholars consider martyrdom in the early Church, their starting point is usually the death of Jesus Christ. Johnson for example writes that "Jesus himself is the first martyr,

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[26] Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, 39. The preoccupation with the present life and a shadowy existence is, for example, made clear in Psalm 117.15: "The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence". There are exceptions to this observation: the Book of Daniel clearly teaches about individual survival after death.

[27] Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, p. 41.

[28] Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, 43. The martyrs were not only celebrated as examples of zeal for God but for other admired virtues such as manliness, courage, nobleness of spirit, boldness or frankness, patience, cheerfulness, and joy (2 Macc. 6:30; 4 Macc. 5-11:12).

[29] Henten, "Reception of Daniel 3 and 6 and the Maccabeean Martyrdoms in the Hebrews 11:33-38", 377.

as Revelation expresses it: 'the faithful witness [martyr], the first born of the dead.'"[30] Jesus' death may be looked at as martyrdom if we take the perspective of the authors who view the death of Jesus as substitutionary atonement (also known as vicarious atonement).

After the death of Jesus, his followers lived relatively peaceful lives in ordinary local Jewish communities until they were recognized for the first time in Antioch as "Christians" (Acts 11:25-26). Christians generally refrained from offering civic piety to the gods of Rome; and with the intertwining political and religious power in Roman order, Christians' refusal and their monotheism implicitly undermined the foundations of the Roman Empire. When the city of Rome was destroyed by fire around the year 64, Nero blamed the Christians for causing the fire and unleashed a persecution against them. All who were suspected to be Christians in Rome were arrested, and their admission that they were Christians was considered as synonymous with admission of arson.[31] This incident began the wave of persecution against the Christians as a consequence of professing their faith.

Christianity continued to develop and spread beyond the small community described in the Acts of the Apostles. This development went alongside persecution of Christians by the Roman imperial authorities. In fact some Christian observers like Tertullian asserted that it is because of martyrdom that Christianity flourished, as attested by Tertullian's famous phrase that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

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[30] Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 73. This is an important point because it will become clear in this study that the most central idea in subsequent martyrdoms will be seen as following Jesus the Master to his death.

[31] For more discussion see Timothy D. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History* (Tria Corda 5.) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 2-4.

The persecution of Christians and narratives of martyrdom have been well documented over the centuries. Geoffrey Ernest Maurice De Ste. Croix, the historian who specialized in examining the classical era, divides the persecutions into three distinct phases. The first phase, he says, ends with the great fire in Rome; the second begins at that point and continues until 250; the third opens with the persecution under Decius around 250 and lasts until 313.[32]

The reasons for the persecution of Christians have also been well documented.[33] Here it only suffices to highlight that Christians were charged with civil disobedience. They were required to show their loyalty to the Roman emperors. They were considered transgressors of the laws of the state because they refused to honor the emperor as king, lord, and god, as was required of them as members of imperial society. Frend writes that Roman magistrates were "baffled by the apparent contradictions in the conduct of Christians" who at one moment claimed to be good citizens, paid their taxes and led exemplary lives while at another they displayed "utter contempt for the established worship of the gods and flagrant disobedience to the commands of the representatives in Rome."[34]

From the foregoing discussion we can argue that the martyrs saw their deaths as a rallying point for their living compatriots and as an affront to their tormentors. Frend also

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[32] Geoffrey Ernest Maurice De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 106. Maurice does not commit himself to these periods strictly for he makes these divisions because it is "convenient" to do so. He himself admits that there was no persecution by the Roman government that we know of until 64. He adds (106) furthermore that between 64 and 250 there were only isolated incidences and local persecutions.

[33] Frend for example, has studied the causes of Christian persecution and analyzed three main elements as reasons: (a) public opinion; (b) the attitude of the local Roman governor; and (c) the policy of the emperor. See Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church.*

[34] Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 168.

sees another reason for persecution—that although it was always difficult to find crimes which could be invoked against Christians, the most likely charge was that they "insulted the gods."[35]

1.5 Some outstanding martyrs

There are martyrs whom we may single out to give us a glimpse of martyrdom in the early Christian centuries. The most notable martyrs of the second century typify the dominant attitudes of the martyrs and of Christian believers. They include the bishops Ignatius of Antioch (d. c110) and Polycarp of Smyrna (d. 156), Perpetua, Felicity and their companions, and the philosopher Justin (d. c165).[36] The Christian believers made very careful efforts to preserve the accounts of the sufferings of the martyrs. *An Old English Martyrology* reports that:

> The early Christians often procured the minutes of lawsuits instituted against their brethren; in some cases they were themselves present in the

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[35] Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 167. William Lecky seems to concur with this point when he writes that:

> Proselytizing with an untiring energy, pouring a fierce stream of invective and ridicule upon the gods on whose favor the multitude believe all national prosperity to depend, not infrequently insulting worshippers, and defacing the idols, they soon stung the pagan worshippers to madness, and convinced them that every calamity that fell upon the empire was the righteous vengeance of the gods. Nor was the skeptical politician more likely to regard with favor a religion whose development was plainly incompatible with the whole religious policy of the empire. The new church, as it was then organized, must have appeared to him essentially and fundamentally intolerant. To permit it to triumph was to permit the extinction of religious liberty in an empire which comprised all the leading nations of the world, and tolerated all their creeds.

See his *History of European Morals: From Augustus to Charlemagne* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1926).

[36] There is a vast and abundant literature on martyrs. Dr. Frend's volume is a good guide through the complexities of both old and modern source material. See his *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* ch. 2 & 3. Barnes has also offered a valuable analysis of a wide range of early martyr documents. Barnes calls our attention to a fact that is basic and pertinent to this present study, namely that Christian hagiography presupposes the idea of martyrdom, which is why the genre of 'Acts of the Martyrs' flourished steadily from the middle of the second to the middle of the third century. See his *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*, 42-95.

> law court, and were therefore able to give a reliable report of what they had seen and heard.[37]

There are many written accounts which preserved the tradition of martyrdom and their significance to the Christian communities. Two examples may suffice to illustrate the special quality of martyrs' deaths and the prevailing sentiments of the Christian believers.

First, the martyrdom of Perpetua, Felicity and companions around the year 203 had a special kind of charm. They represent the category of martyrs whose deaths were viewed as a direct combat with the devil. That is why Perpetua exclaimed: "I was afraid, never before had I seen such darkness. O, the day of horror! The overpowering heat caused by the crowd of prisoners! The soldiers' brutality!"[38]

Second, the martyrdom of Polycarp of Smyrna has a special place in the history of martyrdom because his martyrdom was viewed as a sacrifice to God in a manner analogous to Christ's sacrificial death.[39] Polycarp was held in very high esteem by the Christian believers of his time. Irenaeus tells us that Polycarp was "trained by the Apostles and had conversed with many who have seen Christ."[40] Polycarp therefore played an important role of linking generations of Christians who personally knew the Apostles with the succeeding generations who sought to share in the experience of Christ and the Apostles.

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[37] George Herzfeld, (ed.), *An Old English Martyrology* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1975), vii. What was "procured" includes catalogues of names, also known as calendars and elaborates details concerning the martyrs: their histories and sufferings (acts of martyrs) including the death-scenes.

[38] Cited in Newman C. Eberhardt, *A Summary of Catholic History: Ancient & Medieval History Vol. I* (London: B Herder Book Co., 1961), 157.

[39] David G. Hunter, "Patristic Spirituality", s.v. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Michael Downey, (ed.) (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 724.

[40] *Adversus Omnes haeresus*, 3.1.

Boniface Ramsey points out that the account of Polycarp's martyrdom is the first noncanonical martyrdom account.[41] Ramsey also posits that it suggests several martyrological themes that became classic in typical literary genres. The anonymous account of Polycarp's martyrdom, which was written around the middle of the second century, shows that Polycarp does not only follow Christ to his death, "the whole course of his martyrdom is a re-enactment of Christ's own suffering."[42]

Polycarp's martyrdom is of great importance to this present study. It is with his martyrdom that we have "the earliest appearance of the words 'martyr' and 'martyrdom' in the clear sense of death at the hands of hostile secular authority."[43] He is the first to be so honored in fact; according to his authentic *Acta*, there was an objection from some quarters that Polycarp would be worshipped instead of Christ.[44] In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* the reasons for dying are further clarified: the martyr dies for his own salvation and for the edification of the Christian believers. Part of the account makes this point:

> We write you, brethren, the things concerning those who suffered martyrdom, especially the blessed Polycarp, who put an end to persecution by sealing it, so to speak, though his own witness. For almost everything that led up to it happened in order that the Lord might show again a martyrdom conformable to the gospel. For he waited to be betrayed just like the Lord did, to the end that we might also be imitators of him "not looking only to that which concerns ourselves, but also that which concerns our neighbors."
>
> For it a mark of true and steadfast love for one not only to desire to be saved oneself, but all the brethren also. Blessed and noble, indeed are all the martyrdoms that have taken place according to God's will… For who would not admire their nobility and patient endurance and love of their master? Some of them, so torn by scourging that the anatomy of their flesh

[41] Boniface Ramsey, "Martyrdom" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Michael Downey (ed.) (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993), 663.
[42] Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers*, 129.
[43] G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13.
[44] Eberhardt, *A Summary of Catholic History*, 157.

> was visible as far as their veins and arteries, endured with such patience that even the bystanders took pity and wept.[45]

Some scholars have expressed their doubts as to the historical worthiness of the account of Polycarp's martyrdom. In fact Bowersock says that Polycarp's martyrdom was most likely constructed by Christians in the hundred years or so between about the year 50 and 150 and adapted in the second half of the second century.[46] In Polycarp's narrative we begin to see a clear though undeveloped theology of martyrdom. It is a theology that would gradually be developed to show Christian believers the way to the Cross and Jesus' gospel promises. Polycarp's narrative was also intertwined with a theological giant who even today is highly recognized: Origen, a man who has left enormous and lasting influence on Christian spirituality. Reflecting on Origen provides us with the opportunity to investigate the spiritual aspects of martyrdom.

1.6 The spiritual aspects of martyrdom and inclusion of other groups[47]

Origen has been pointed out in many circles as a man who embodies the teachings of his age. He can aptly represent the dominant voices and theological currents of his time. He considers himself called to the task of preparing Christian believers for martyrdom. Origen's *Exhortation to Martyrdom* has been given musch scholarly attention. According

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[45] Cyril C. Richardson (ed.), *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1970), 149.

[46] Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 13. There is scholarly skepticism about the historical trustworthiness of the Martyrdom of Polycarp that has been raised by others including Hermann Müller, "Das Martyrium Policarpi, Ein Beitrag zur altchristlichen Heiligengeschichte," *Römische Quartalschrift*, 22 (1908), 1-6; Wilhelm Reuning, *Zur Erklärung des Polykarpmartyriums*, Darmstadt, 1917.

[47] This is a vast area whose full development is beyond the scope of this study. However it is important to highlight it here because martyrdom ushered in a new wave of spiritual ideals and practices when asceticism was assimilated into it. When Christianity became established in the Late Roman Empire after the end of martyrdom, asceticism became viewed as "white martyrdom". Sanctity was now not ascribed to martyrs only but extended to confessors, and as Stephen Wilson says to those who "governed Church with piety." Stephen Wilson, ed., *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* (London: 3.ambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

to Marco Rizzi's study, Origen made a distinction between bloody martyrdom and "inner" or "spiritual" martyrdoms. The former represents "the fullness of Christian perfection to such an extent that martyrs are strictly associated with Christ and their sufferings contribute to the Savior's redeeming work."[48] The latter refers to martyrdom as an "ascetical practice of life and virtues, which can substitute the real and 'bloody' martyrdom."[49]

It was held that martyrdom served the same purpose as baptism. In fact Perham emphasizes this when he says that "the martyr was guaranteed to arrive in the next world purified."[50] The theme of martyrdom as a baptism of blood for those who had never been baptized in water was expanded, refined, and given more spiritual precision by Origen.[51] According to Origen, martyrdom as a crucial component of salvation could not only substitute for baptism, but it was also significant for atonement. The Alexandrian teacher said that "Baptism in the form of martyrdom, as received by the Savior, is a purgation for the world; so too, when we receive it, it becomes purgation for many."[52] According to Origen baptism was not only necessary for salvation but it was also a means through which vicarious atonement was made possible.

The final end that awaited the martyrs merits our special attention. Prominent theologians taught that the only way a soul could be joined to God free from sin was by

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[48] Marco Rizzi, "Origen on Martyrdom: Theology and Social Practices" in *Origeniana Nona: Origen and the Religious Practices of His Time*, (Papers of the 9th International Origen Congress Pecs, Hungary, 29 August – 2 September 2005) ed. G. Heidl and R. Somos (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2009), 469.

[49] Rizzi, *Origeniana Nona*, 469.

[50] Michael Perham, *The Communion of Saints*, London: SPCK, 1980, 9.

[51] Ramsey's study tells us that Tertullian's treatise on baptism (*De Baptismo*, 16.) is the first explicit exposition of comparison between baptism and martyrdom. See Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers*, 131.

[52] *Exhortation to martyrdom*, 30.

way of martyrdom. Pobee with his analysis of Pauline theology writes that "the faithful endurance of persecution almost assured one of a place in the kingdom of God."[53] Since martyrdom served the same purpose as baptism and was equivalent to it, martyrs were believed to have an automatic entry into heaven. This belief is definitely a residual eschatological insight that was preserved from Judaism, where we saw that there was a hope for exaltation of the martyrs in the messianic age. Origen, who best represents the sentiments of his age, wondered what could be better than martyrdom:

> What greater joy there can be than the act of martyrdom? A great multitude is assembled to watch the last hours of the martyr. And let each of us remember how many times we have been in danger of an ordinary death, and then let us ask ourselves whether we have not been preserved for something better, for the baptism in blood which washes away our sins and allows us to take our place at the heavenly altar together with all the companions of our warfare.[54]

So great is the necessity of martyrdom that Origen associates Stephen (the protomartyr) directly with his view on martyrdom as "teleiosis"—that is, the end beyond which spiritual progress is neither necessary nor possible.[55] But for those whose faithfulness to Christ and imitation of him were not crowned with martyrdom, Origen is one of the teachers who taught that a possibility of dying to self and exercising asceticism was available to all Christians.

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[53] Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, 111.

[54] *Exhortation to martyrdom*, 39.

[55] Boudewijn Dehandschutter, "Origen and the Episode on Stephen in the Book of Acts" in *Origeniana Nona*, 143. Dehandschutter's study on Origen's insights on St. Stephen is highly informative. This point serves to clarify a separate academic issue: in his preface to Rowan Greer's translation of Origen's selected works, Han Urs von Balthasar observes that there is an "unrestricted tendency of Origenist spirituality to strain 'upward,' the interpretation of the Christian life as an unequivocal 'ascent.'" See Rowan A. Greer (ed.), *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). Might martyrdom as "teleiosis" be considered a reasonable response to Balthasar's observation?

The martyr was therefore the saint *par excellence* by virtue of his precious witness to the truth of the faith for which he died. Wilson is categorical that the term "saint" gradually came to be reserved for the martyr; and according to him the Christian cult of saints did not originate in paganism, but from the veneration of the martyrs.[56] Martyrs were therefore close to Christian believers' spiritual sensibilities because their place in heaven was certain: they went straight to heaven.

Christian teachers maintained that the martyrs did not need the prayers of the living since they had achieved the highest summit of perfection. St. Augustine, for example, taught that the living did not pray for the martyrs, but in stead asked for the martyrs' intercession:

> The sanctification of the martyrs is completed. In virtue of their sacrificial deaths they have reached the summit of perfection. For this reason the Church does not offer prayers on their behalf. She prays for the rest of the Faithful, but not for the martyrs; for they have departed from this world with such high degree of perfection that in stead of being in need of our assistance, they are actually in a position to assist us.[57]

Once the place of the martyrs was clarified and kept in proper focus, several questions emerged regarding the other groups that laid special claims to the membership of the believers. What about the heroes of the Old Testament, the patriarchs and prophets who paved the path of worshipping the one true God and left the legacy of faithfulness? What of the Apostles who laid foundations of the Church of Christ? Several responses were advanced; chief among them is that of Hermas who wrote in the second century and

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[56] Wilson, *Saints and Their Cults*, 3. I must add a rejoinder to Wilson's assertion. While it is possible to maintain that the cult of the saints did not originate from paganism, it is not entirely true that the cult did not have organic link to paganism. Many elements were borrowed from paganism and Christian teachers made compromises to allow Christian believers to ritualize their grief and seek communion with the martyrs and their dead kin by making use of what was readily available to them from non-Christian sources.

[57] St. Augustine, Sermon CCLXXXV, 5, P.L. Vol. 38.

maintained that the Apostles (all of whom were presumed to be martyrs) after their deaths "preached to the saints of the Old Testament and gave them the seal of preaching."[58]

Once the fate of the martyrs, patriarchs, and Apostles had been determined, it remained for the believers to establish a sense of spiritual fellowship with them, a "communion" that was eventually established in the creeds of the Church. When persecutions ended and sanctity became a new criterion of qualification for incorporation into sainthood, several categories of saints were included, such as confessors, ascetics, virgins, and bishops.[59] They were recognized among other things for their imitation of Christ, heroic virtues and Christian perfection.

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[58] Perham, *The Communion of Saints*, 10.

[59] Perham has given examples of "holy persons" such as Paulinus of Nola, Felix, Mercellus, and Mark who were accorded the status of "saints" because of their outstanding sanctity and or contribution to the Church. Michael Perham, *The Communion of Saints: An Examination of the Place of the Christian Dead in the Belief, Worship, and Calendars of the Church* (London: SPCK, 1980), 22-23.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 THE VENERATION OF SAINTS

2.1 The records of saints: the problem of fictitious hagiography

The inclusion of other categories of people into the ranks of holy people gradually broadened the understanding of sainthood and led to a more localized identification with the saints and celebration of sainthood. It also led the ordinary Christians to desire concrete examples of exemplary Christians whose spiritual ideals the believers could identify with. This tendency resulted in fictitious hagiography as a number of literatures have proved.

Barnes, in his well written study, has pointed out that hagiographic materials from the second and third centuries to a large extent had factual validity. However, from the fourth through sixth centuries, one finds descriptions of saints and martyrs who never existed. Barnes writes that:

> After persecution ceased, Christian hagiography took one of two different directions. On the one hand, martyrs were replaced by monks, bishops and the holy men and women as the heroes of hagiography, while hagiographers were often more eager to instill explicit moral and theological improvement in their readers than accurately to record the actions of their heroes and heroines. On the other hand, since nothing that was both new and true could any longer be said about martyrs who were receding rapidly into the past, hagiographers who wrote about the age of persecution were compelled either to rewrite and embroider a genuine old text or resort to wholesale invention.[1]

Hagiographers' major goals included instilling "explicit and moral values" which also meant that they "embroider" old texts or "invent" new stories altogether. This insight opens up areas of investigations that are relevant to this study and beyond it. First, what role did the legendary stories play in the lives of Christian believers? Second, if it was possible to encounter both the mythical and historical written accounts of the lives of the martyrs and saints from the fourth to

[1] Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*, 154.

the sixth centuries, how many of the saints' lives were written purely for historical reasons from the earliest times and how many were merely legends that repeated the conceptions found in pre-Christian religious tales?[2] Third, and most importantly, did the doctrine of communion of saints gather some folkloric elements along its way to becoming a Church doctrine?

Other scholars have looked critically and found discrepancies in the narratives that were popular. In his study of *The Saints Who Never Were*, Lancelot Sheppard, for example, studies many popular saint stories. He cites the example of the hagiographical romances given in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. After analyzing the facts about Thecla, Sheppard's verdict is that "there is no certainty about even this, and it is equally likely that the very existence of Thecla is as much the product of the author's imagination as are certainly the extraordinary events with which her life is crowded."[3]

H. Delehaye cautions that:

> In general the study of superstitious practices of which the existence has been proved at certain shrines dedicated to very popular saints, should be carried on by far greater discernment and a more critical spirit than is generally to be met with among folk-lorists who have undertaken the duty for the historian. The accuracy of their information is often more apparent than real, and not a few among them possess a quite remarkable gift for establishing far-fetched resemblances.[4]

2.2 The initial stages of veneration of martyrs

What followed the recognition of the special place of the martyrs among the believers was an immense outpouring of faith that strengthened the Church. Tertullian's famous phrase echoed

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[2] See for examples Balaam's talking donkey (Numbers 22:28-30); the story of Elisha found in 4 Kings 2:23-24 (how the Lord instantly sent two female bears that emerge from a nearby wood at the curse of Elisha and mauled all 42 children to death who mocked Elisha's bald head).

[3] Lancelot Sheppard, *The Saints Who Never Were* (Dayton, Ohio: Giniger, 1969), 29.

[4] Delahaye, *Legend of the Saints*, 156.

well the experience of the time when he said that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church.

Christian believers who personally knew or were related to the martyrs would have been the first to hold on to the belief that their loved ones had gone to their eternal reward. What were the Christians going to do to impress the experience of martyrdom and its significance upon their memory? Christian believers seem to have answered this question by establishing a system of honoring the martyrs. This system, as we have seen, was a natural outgrowth of the Jewish traditions in the last two pre-Christian centuries. This system, Johnson tells, consisted of (but was never limited to) "building tombs of the prophets" and decorating "monuments of the righteous."[5] Johnson writes that:

> Honor was given to the founding mothers and fathers of Israel, to Kings from the dynasty of David, and to murdered prophets such as Zachariah. Burial sites of such people were known by fact or tradition, Rachel near Bethlehem or Abraham and Sarah in Hebron, and their graves were visited and held in respect. Special honor was paid to the memory of those who had suffered or died because of their Jewish faith in times of persecution.[6]

These simple acts were a miniature representation of religious practices that subsequently became widespread in western Christendom. These were simple acts, but they were also a great microcosm for broader religious practices that would have far reaching consequences to succeeding generations of Christian believers. The martyrs were not only the seed of the Church but they also occupied privileged positions in the Church due to their link with the heavenly courts.

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[5] Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 64.
[6] Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 64.

These initial stages of veneration of the martyrs were also marked by questions regarding their connection to pagan practices. Pierre-Yves Emery has pointed out that accusations were leveled at devotions to martyrs as being nothing but a transposition of the pagan cult of heroes.[7] In our foregoing discussion we have seen that in classical antiquity the societies preserved the memories of their heroes by acclaiming the heroes' sacrifices and immortalizing them by erecting tombs over their graves. We should not be therefore surprised at the accusation that Christian believers borrowed from pagan practices. But we shall see how Christian teachers responded to such accusations and harmonized their teachings and practices in the light of these challenges.

As we have pointed out already, Christian martyrs were those whom Christian believers first recognized as saints. The *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*, the earliest surviving piece of Christian hagiography, provides us with an example of a martyr's body as a relic and the celebration of the day of his death as a feast. Both the cult of relics and the liturgical cult of the saints find their origins among the earliest Christian communities with the recognition of Christian martyrs and their public veneration.

2.3 The tombs, graves, and monuments of saints as sacred places

The tombs, graves, and monuments of the saints (hereafter referred to simply as graves) were evidently places where the believers could express their sense of belonging to those who were perceived to be virtuous and therefore living with God. Peter Brown in his study of the cult of the saints writes:

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[7] Pierre-Yves Emery, *L'unite Des Croyants Au Ciel Et Sur La Terre - La Communion Des Saints Et Son Expremssion Dans La Priere De L'eglise* (Tr. D.J. and M. Watson, *The Communion of Saints*, [New York: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1966], 48.)

> The graves of the saints—whether these were the solemn rock tombs of the Jewish patriarchs in the Holy Land or, in Christian cycles, tombs, fragments of bodies or, even, physical objects that had made contact with these bodies—were privileged places, where the contrasted poles of Heaven and Earth met.[8]

Brown's observation points to a characteristic pattern in the early Church, namely that the Late-antique Christian piety revolved around the veneration of the saints by honoring their graves. The grave became a cultic place, the *locus sanctorum* where the power of Jesus was manifest through the saint, which is why the faithful celebrated the Lord's Supper over the burial places.[9] By these acts the believer said the saint did not leave the earth for heaven but rather brought heaven to earth. The Christian's religious practices "concentrated obsessively on the strange flash that could occur when the two hitherto distinct categories joined in the back of men's minds."[10]

The Christian believers' practice of visiting the graves or burial grounds of their departed kin became a social and religious issue in early centuries of the Church. St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, tells us of how believers who wished to remember and honor their ancestors on the days of their memorials gathered at grave sites. Those believers brought with them symbolic gifts of wine and food to the gravesites.[11] St. Ambrose forbade them from doing so on the grounds that the tradition was associated with pagan rites. St. Augustine, praising his mother for heeding the teaching of St. Ambrose, wrote:

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[8] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 3.

[9] Shawn Madigan, "Communion of Saints" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Michael Downey, (ed) (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 847.

[10] Madigan, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 847.

[11] Although we leave analysis to be done in the third part of this study, we may point out that to an objective observer outside of this culture these practices raise the questions of the people's understanding of the afterlife. Moreover, the propensity of these practices to turn into very non-symbolic bouts of wine consumption thereby losing the purposes of memorializing the dead members of the families cannot be ignored.

> She willingly ceased this custom when she found that this great preacher, this holy bishop, had forbidden such ceremonies even to those who performed them with sobriety . . . my mother probably would not have given up this habit so readily if the prohibition had come from another whom she loved less dearly than Ambrose.[12]

Emery in his study of this matter writes that St. Augustine even risked his authority as a bishop when he condemned the practice; perhaps Augustine's confidence in forbidding it relied on the fact that other greater teachers had condemned it. Emery writes:

> And not without risking his authority, Augustine will, following in the steps of At. Ambrose, and together with many others oppose the tradition of carrying food to tombs, and still more iniquitous custom of picnicking around these tombs.[13]

The "risk" on Augustine's part in Emery's observation illustrates that these practices were widespread and deeply rooted in the ordinary people's cultural identity. Even St. Augustine, a man who stood as the last patristic and the first medieval father of Western Christianity, could not correct the distorted aspects of the believers' devotions to their deceased kin without incurring the wrath of the ordinary people and setting a stage for a confrontation between the Church authorities and the ordinary people. All in all these practices of veneration developed gradually and steadily so that by the sixth century the tombs "became centers of ecclesiastical life" in most cities of the former Western Empire.[14]

F. Chiovard writes that during the persecution, the veneration of the dead was the only cult that could be practiced freely at Rome. Christians gathered near the tombs to pay homage to the dead, sometimes with some liturgical celebrations. After the Constantinian peace, the practice of veneration of the dead grew and churches were erected over the graves of the

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[12] *Confessions*, VI.2.
[13] Emery, *L'Unite des Croyants*, 49.
[14] Emery, *L'Unite des Croyants*, 49.

martyrs.[15] We see this development with the basilicas of St. Peter on the Vatican and St. Paul on the Via Ostia.

The tombs of the two apostles, Saints Peter and Paul, have received considerable literary attention. Their association with Rome has been attested by some literary and archeological evidence. The remains of these two famous Apostles are said to have been brought from their respective original resting places on the Vatican Hill and beside the Via Ostiensis during the time of Valerianic persecution in 285 CE.[16] According to Karl Baus, Roman congregations in the third century were divided about the burial sites of the apostles: under the Tropaian on the Vatican hill and on the Via Appia.[17] What is pertinent to this study are: (i) the burial sites of the early Christians were of great value to the early Christians, and (ii) the burial of the two apostles is an integral part of the historical development of the city of Rome and two apostles were buried near the city of Rome.

The first documented and well-developed veneration of relics is of these two saints from around the year 260 CE. The graffiti that were found from the excavation of Peter's grave tells of a typical expectation and faith of the Christian believers who wrote: "Peter, pray for the holy Christian people buried near your body."[18] More excavations carried out on Peter's grave in

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[15] F. Chiovard, ed., "Relics" *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol. 11, 51.

[16] Phillip Esler, *New Testament Theology*, 209. Many authors have pointed at the controversial nature of the question of Peter's last residence and place of burial. See for example Karl Baus (Hubert Jedin, ed.), *History of the Church: From Apostolic Community to Constantine*, Vol. I (New York: Seaburry Press, 1980), 115-118. Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins contend that absolute certainty about Peter's grave site is not attainable; they expose in their study the essential historical arguments that prove Peter's connection with the Church of Rome as were known to Christian believers of the late-first and second centuries. See Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins, *The Shrine of Saint Peter and the Vatican Excavations* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 127-133. Peter Lampe cites Gaius, the Roman Christian who confirmed that he could "point to the victory signs of the apostles. You may go to the Vatican or to the road to Ostia…" (in Eusebius, *Hist. Ecc*., 2.25.7). See Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentius: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 104.

[17] Baus, *History of the Church*, 116-117. Esler does not highlight the disputes; he simply states that the tombs of the two Apostles were located at the catacomb near the Via Appia. See Esler, *New Testament Theology*, 209.

[18] Esler, *New Testament Theology*, 209.

1915 discovered that there were other graffiti that were directed towards Peter and Paul jointly: "Peter and Paul keep X in mind"; "Peter and Paul make invocations on behalf of Victor."[19]

What was the theological rationale behind asking Peter (or any saint for that matter) to pray for another dead person on behalf of the living? It was because, as we have seen in the case of the martyr, "the saint in heaven was 'present' at his tomb on earth."[20] The belief in the presence of the saint in the tomb is why in the fourth century Christian believers could express their belief that Martin (of Tours) was both present in the heavenly courts and at his tomb, and in the efficacy of his intercession in the words:

> Here lies Martin the Bishop, of holy memory, whose soul is in the hand of God;
> but he is fully here, present and made plain in miracles of every kind.[21]

The words written on Martin of Tours' tomb point to another point that we must pay attention to: Christian communities found refuge in the supernatural (or mystical) power issued from the saint. Christian believers could hold the memory of the saint (have spiritual fellowship, communion with the dead) and depend on the saint for the saint's intercessory role as well. The living rendered the dead "present" by their devotional practices that expressed faith in the power of the dead to aid the living in their temporal needs.

2.4 Devotions to the Saints' relics

"Relics" (from Greek *leipsana* and its Latin equivalent *reliquiae*) did not always have a religious meaning. F. Chiovard tells us that the veneration of the dead was a common cultural practice

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[19] Esler, *New Testament Theology*, 209.
[20] Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 3.
[21] Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 4.

among almost all people in the western world long before Christianity.[22] Moreover, Delehaye gives us two examples of use of relics in pre-Christian times. Delehaye tells of "the well-known fresco in the Naples museum of a priest of Isis standing before the *cella* of a temple and offering for the people's worship a sort of pyx containing water fom the sacred Nile" and of Cicero's account of "the revered statue of Hercules, of which the mouth and chin were worn by the pressure of the lips of his devotees."[23]

Gunnel Ekroth is more explicit in his observation that Christian believers borrowed the idea of keeping relics from classical antiquity where cities and sanctuaries in ancient Greece claimed to have custody of the remains of venerated heroes.[24] Here too is an instance that illustrates Christians' borrowing of certain practices from popular culture to ritualize their public and private grief. Charles McGinnis makes general and insightful statements that place this argument into proper perspective:

> Amongst all people it has always been customary to preserve the relics of their heroes and great benefactors, and to render the highest honors to those precious reminders of heroic virtue and splendid deeds. For it is universal tendency of the human heart to honor greatness in whatever form it appears.[25]

The concept assumed a specifically religious meaning in Christian circles when Christian believers held that the saints' material remains and other objects that were sanctified by contact with their bodies had miraculous powers. What was unique about Christians' interest in and emphasis on the relics was the Christians' desire to cling to the outstanding members of the

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[22] Chiovard, ed., *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 50. The value of relics is not far removed from our times either. Wilson reminds us that Napoleon's toothbrush was displayed in London in 1965 and that his hat was sold for a large sum of money; Lord Byron's shoes and other belongings were preserved as 'sacred relics' at Missolonghi; while Marilyn Monroe's clothes were sold amid a lot of publicity in 1981. Wilson, *Saints and their Cults*, 43.

[23] Hippolyte Delahaye, *The Legends of the Saints* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962), 120-121.

[24] Gunnel Ekroth, "Heroes and Hero-Cult," in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, Daniel Ogden, ed., (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Pub., 2007), 110–111.

[25] Charles McGinnis, *The Communion of Saints* (London: B. Herder, 1912), 224.

Christian family: martyrs and saints. The venerable objects were not always displayed because sometimes people were claiming to have relics that they really did not have. But whenever displayed they included furniture, clothing, spears, shields, or other weaponry such as chariots, ships, and figureheads.[26]

The notion that God can do miracles through the bodies of his servants is well documented in the Hebrew Scriptures. It was known that a man regained his life when his body touched the bones of the Prophet Elisha.[27] Such beliefs must have influenced the early Christian thinking regarding the bodies and paraphernalia of outstanding persons within the Christian communities. In the Acts of the Apostles we read the account of Christian believers using Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons to cure the sick and cast out demons. There seems, however, to be some dispute among the Christian community in the time of St. Paul regarding some of the Apostles' paraphernalia.

Chiovardes gives an example of how the Christian believers at Smyrna venerated the relics of Polycarp as early as the middle of the second century.[28] It is with the veneration of the relics of Polycarp that we see a shift in the manner of veneration "from a private and implicit veneration" to "a public and explicit cult of the remains of the saint."[29]

Christian believers' desire to come closer to the saints and in that way form a closer bond with God, grew as time went by. This interest is clearly manifested in the growing number of Christians who thronged churches and even stole relics. Matilda Web gives as an example that

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[26] Ekroth, "Heroes and Hero-Cult," 110-111.
[27] 2 Kings 13:20-21.
[28] Chiovard, ed., *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 50-51.
[29] Chiovard, ed., *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 50-51.

during the sixth century the crypts of several churches were remodeled or redesigned for greater security to combat the theft of relics.[30]

At those early times, there were no doctrinal statements that had been sufficiently analyzed and examined in depth by the Church regarding the veneration of the relics. However, Christian teachers were unanimous in pointing out the inferiority of the relics. Jerome declared, "We do not worship, we do not adore, for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the creator, but we venerate the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore him whose martyrs they are."[31]

The pious ordinary Christians venerated the saints with painstaking scrupulosity. In such religious attitudes we may naturally expect the devotions to be stretched beyond reasonable limits because believers easily lose sight of the doctrinal truths of the Church, even if at that time they were only loosely defined. Christian believers actually exaggerated their devotions and deviated from what was considered to be doctrinally sound in regard to the relics of the saints. When, for example, there arose confusion that the honor owed Christ would be diverted if the relics of Polycarp were secured, the editor of Polycarp's *Acta* prudently answered, giving a clear-sighted distinction between the veneration that was given to Polycarp and the worship to Christ:

> They failed to realize that we will never abandon Christ, who suffered for the salvation of all, saved throughout the world—the Innocent one for the guilty—or to worship any other. Him we adore as the Son of God; the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord.[32]

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[30] Matilda Web, *The Churches and Catacombs of Early Rome: A Comprehensive Guide* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), xxii.

[31] Jerome, *Ad Riparium*, i, P.L., XXII, 907, cited in *Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, Charles G. Herbermann, Edward A. Pace, Condé B. Pallen, Thomas J. Shahan, John J. Wynne, eds. (New York: Gilmary Society, 1913-1958), 735.

[32] Cited in Eberhardt, *A Summary of Catholic History*, 157-158.

It appears that the religious practices arrogating more power to the saints' relics continued in spite of the efforts by teachers to curtail superstitious beliefs and confusing religious practices. In Jerome's time Vigilantius criticized the worship of relics and the keeping of night vigils in Southern Gaul. It was necessary for Jerome to clarify that:

> We, it is true, refuse to worship or adore, I say not the relics of the martyrs, but even the sun and moon, the angels and archangels, the Cherubim and Seraphim and 'every name that is named, not only in this world but also in that which is to come.' For we may not serve the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Still we honour the relics of the martyrs, that we may adore Him whose martyrs they are. We honour the servants that their honour may be reflected upon their Lord who Himself says:--'he that receiveth you receiveth me.' I ask Vigilantius, Are the relics of Peter and of Paul unclean? Was the body of Moses unclean, of which we are told (according to the correct Hebrew text) that it was buried by the Lord Himself? And do we, every time that we enter the basilicas of apostles and prophets and martyrs, pay homage to the shrines of idols? Are the tapers which burn before their tombs only the tokens of idolatry? I will go farther still and ask a question which will make this theory recoil upon the head of its inventor and which will either kill or cure that frenzied brain of his, so that simple souls shall be no more subverted by his sacrilegious reasonings. Let him answer me this, Was the Lord's body unclean when it was placed in the sepulchre? And did the angels clothed in white raiment merely watch over a corpse dead and defiled, that ages afterwards this sleepy fellow might indulge in dreams and vomit forth his filthy surfeit, so as, like the persecutor Julian, either to destroy the basilicas of the saints or to convert them into heathen temples?[33]

What becomes clear to us is that the veneration of the relics by Christians was a practice that was adapted from pre-existing rituals from imperial Rome and surrounding cultural traditions. Christians incorporated rituals from the pagan world that expressed the Christians' own circumstances and religious needs. In the words of Delahaye, "one and the same thought in analogous circumstances, has, centuries later, produced identical attitudes and actions."[34]

The pagan antecedents of veneration of Christian relics are of great importance to this study. There are scholars who argue that the Christian cult of saints did not originate in

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[33] Jerome, *To Riparius, Epistle 109:1*

[34] Delahaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, 121.

paganism, but rather entirely from veneration of the martyrs.[35] I show these pagan elements in the cult of Christian saints so that later on I can analyze the kinds of compromises that Christianity made to allow for a greater numerical following. Even St. Augustine explained the compromises by declaring that "what we teach is one thing, what we tolerate is another."[36]

2.5 Veneration of saints in the context of prayer

The study of relics provides us with a window to see how the faithful formed a spiritual bond with the martyrs and saints and consequently with God. The understanding behind the pious practices directed towards the saints was that the saints could intercede for the living.

We already saw that the graffiti in the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul asked the two saints to "pray for Victor." The challenge always lurking around the veneration of the saints was the complexity of religious acts that were directed towards the saints rather than towards God. Just as we saw in the case of veneration of the relics, there were occasions on which the faithful venerated the saints with so much exterior pomp that their veneration seemed to others to be distorted acts of worship and even superstitious. A good example is St. Jerome's letter showing how Jerome was at pains to explain that Christians' acts of spontaneous acts of veneration were acceptable Christian practices. The letter shows the kinds of concerns that were open to question and that had to be addressed systematically:

> We do not light candles in broad daylight, as you accuse us of doing, to no avail; we do so in order to dispel the shadows of darkness and to remain awake to the light, rather than to sleep in dismal darkness like you do. If some persons—because of that ignorance and simplicity typical of uneducated men or pious old ladies, to whom the words of the scriptures can aptly be applied: They bear

[35] See for example Wilson, *Saints and their Cults*, 3.
[36] St. Augustine, *Against Faustus*, 20.21.

> witness and have zeal for the Lord but without discretion (Rom 10:2)—light candles in honor of the martyrs, what harm is done? The Apostles too once lamented the squandering of precious ointment, but they were reproached by the words of our Lord (Mt 26; Mk 14). Christ had no need of precious ointment, nor have the Martyrs the need of the light of candles; …Those who light candles receive a recompense corresponding to their faith, according to the words of the Apostle: Everyone is to follow his own conscience (Rom 14:5). Do you call such persons idolatrous? I do not deny that all of us who believe in Christ have com forth from the darkness of idolatry, inasmuch as we were not born Christians but became such by rebirth of baptism. …But our present homage is offered to the Martyrs and must therefore be accepted. Even though there are not relics of the Martyrs, nevertheless in all the Churches of the East candles are lit during the reading of the gospel even when the sun is already far above the horizon. We do this not to dispel the darkness, but as a sign of our joy.[37]

There are two major points in Jerome's argument. First, the freedom and spontaneity of the ordinary Christians was such that they did not make reference to certain pre-existing sets of Christian rules and policies for their rituals, but made use of symbols within the radius of their reach. From Ancient Egyptians who used torches made by soaking the pithy core of reeds in molten tallow to Romans who used the wick candle to aid travelers at dark, light homes and places of worship at night, Christians adopted the use of candles for the veneration of martyrs.[38]

Secondly, Jerome defended Christians whose piety was disparaged by their adversaries who associated candles with paganism. Jerome used the scriptures to show certain practices and attitudes from the time of Jesus and thereby laid a foundation on which the ordinary people's ritual actions were legitimized.

The critical voices that were directed to the objectionable Christian practices persisted. Christian teachers continued to defend Christian practices. At times they had to come out

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[37] St. Jerome, *Liber contra Vigilantium, 7, PL 23*, 345-346.

[38] Light and fire have been used to accompany sacred rites in the history of many religions. In Christianity, however, it seems that the use of candles was a late development as Church historians seem to agree that there was no ceremonial use of lighted candles, torches or lamps during the first three centuries of the Church. See Smith-Cheetham and Samuel Cheetham, (eds.), *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities: Being a Continuation of the 'Dictionary of the Bible'*, Vol. II (New York : Kraus Reprint Co., 1968), 993.

strongly and try to highlight the meaning of the rituals and practices that Christians performed. By defending Christians' rituals the teachers continued to lay firmer foundations for other practices. St. Augustine in his time had to explain, for example, that

> We do not construct shrines, consecrate priests and render rites and sacrifices for these martyrs. …It is not they but God who is our God. It is true that we honor their shrines because they were holy men of God who fought for truth, even unto death, so that true religion might be made known and falsehoods and fictions be overcome. . . . Any signs of veneration paid by pious people at the tombs of martyrs are mere tributes to their memory, not sacred ceremonies nor sacrifices offered to the dead, as to gods.[39]

But communion with the saints in the arena of prayer was not always characterized by deviations, exaggerations, and misrepresentations. Very early on, when nascent orthodoxy was struggling to find a voice, there were vague allusions to the intercessory powers of the saints for the living, as we have noted with the graffiti found near the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul. As time went by there was ordered and systematic input by eminent teachers that laid a firm foundation in regard to saints and prayer. Origen was the first to speak explicitly on the invocation of the saints. Regarding "supplications," intercessions," and "thanksgiving," the Alexandrian teacher wrote:

> It is not improper to address these to saints, and two of them, I mean intercession and thanksgiving, not only to saints but also to men, but supplication only to saints, as for instance to some Paul or Peter, that they may aid us, making us worthy to obtain the power granted unto them for the forgiveness of sins.[40]

There is no documented systematic input after Origen's work until about a century later, when teachers such as Hilary, Basil, Gregory Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa made some remarkable efforts through their writings.[41] Basil's focused input merits our attention:

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[39] St. Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.27, Gerald G. Walsh et al., (tr.), New York: Image Books, 169-170.
[40] Origen, *De Oratione*, 14.
[41] Perham, *The Communion of Saints*, 13.

> I accept also the holy apostles, and martyrs, and I call upon them for their intercession to God, that by them, that is by their mediation, the good God may be propitious to me and that I may be granted redemption for my offences.[42]

A clear distinction emerged. There were efforts to distinguish between divine worship and the veneration due to the saints. By the middle of fifth century, Cyril of Alexandria, who was renowned for his extensive writings and who was a leading protagonist in the Christological controversies, wrote that "we do not call the holy martyrs gods, and we do not adore them as such, but we accord them a worship of love and honor."[43] Augustine was even more explicit: "Beloved, venerate the martyrs, praise them, love them, celebrate them, honor them; but it is the God of the martyrs that we should worship."[44]

Augustine went even further to suggest the adoption of the Greek term λατρεια that was further clarified in the course of history. In his dialogue with Faustus regarding venerating the martyrs, Augustine explained that

> No one officiating at the altar in the saints' burying-place ever says, We bring an offering to thee, O Peter! Or O Paul! Or O Cyprian! The offering is made to God, who gave the crown of martyrdom, while it is in memory of those thus crowned. The emotion is increased by the associations of the place, and love is excited both towards those who are our examples, and towards Him by whose help we may follow such examples. We regard the martyrs with the same affectionate intimacy that we feel towards holy men of God in this life, when we know that their hearts are prepared to endure the same suffering for the truth of the gospel. There is more devotion in our feeling towards the martyrs, because we know that their conflict is over; and we can speak with greater confidence in praise of those already victors in heaven, than of those still combating here. What is properly divine worship, which the Greeks call latria [*λατρεια*], and for which there is no word in Latin, both in doctrine and in practice, we give only to God. To this worship belongs the offering of sacrifices; as we see in the word idolatry, which means the giving of this worship to idols. Accordingly we never offer, or require any one to offer, sacrifice to a martyr, or to a holy soul, or to any angel.[45]

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[42] Basil, *Ep*., ccclx.
[43] *Contra Julian, Imperat*. 1, 6, cited in Emery, *The Communion of Saints*, 83.
[44] Augustine, *Sermon* 273, 9.
[45] Augustine, *Against Faustus* 20.21.

In effect, Augustine said that acts of cult offered to the saints are ways to make explicit statements about their closeness to God and God's greatness over all. Augustine also provided a clarification that guided the Church in its use of the grammar for the honor due to saints. He wrote:

> For this is the worship which is due to the Divinity, or, to speak more accurately, to the Deity; and, to express this worship in a single word as there does not occur to me any Latin term sufficiently exact, I shall avail myself, whenever necessary, of a Greek word. *Latreia*, whenever it occurs in Scripture, is rendered by the word service. But that service which is due to men, and in reference to which the apostle writes that servants must be subject to their own masters [*Ephesians 6:5*], is usually designated by another word in Greek [*douleia*] whereas the service which is paid to God alone by worship, is always, or almost always, called Latreia, in the usage of those who wrote from the divine oracles.[46]

But did the two terminologies (*latria* and *dulia*) effectively direct Christian believers to a theocentric orientation without detractions and diversions? I leave analysis until the subsequent chapters. I must, however, recall at this point that when veneration of the saints (including honor to the Blessed Virgin Mary) evolved in the different ages of the Church and when more elaborate and complex questions arose, newer spiritual approaches had to be adopted and further refinement and clarification of terms had to be made.[47]

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[46] Augustine, *City of God*, 10.1.

[47] Molinari for example, has shown how "adoration" was applied in its original wider and more generic sense to God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Angels and the saints by outstanding personalities as Robert Bellermine in his *De Ecclessia Triumphante*. Molinari, *Saints*, 225. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* (2a 2ae, 103; 121.1 ad 3) detailed a more explicit treatment of the distinctions which we shall consider in the subsequent chapters of this work.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0 COMMUNION OF SAINTS AS CHURCH DOCTRINE

3.1 Models of communion with the saints

Christian believers all through the centuries have always tried to articulate their relationship with the martyrs and saints. Scholars, from their own perspectives, have attempted to describe various approaches that best express in concrete ways the spiritual bond between Christian believers and saints.

Elizabeth Johnson, has delineated two approaches to the study of saints that have received wide acceptance by other scholars. Johnson begins by considering how the Christian community viewed their relationship to the martyrs and to other deceased holy persons. Important to Johnson is how the community envisioned all of them, living and dead, standing before God. Johnson arrives at two distinctly different patterns (or models): "one an egalitarian model that names [the saints] as companions and friends, the other a patriarchal [model] that casts certain privileged dead into positions of patronage."[1]

The first model, according to Johnson, was developed in the age of the martyrs. In this model "the living were partners, companions, co-disciples with those who had given their lives, one witnessing to the other, both carried along by the saving grace poured out in Christ."[2] The martyrs were companions and friends of the living in Christ. They were the "cloud of witnesses" spoken of in Hebrews (12:1) who are the friends and companions of the living, persuading them, advocating for them, as well as challenging them to complete the work they began. Johnson concludes that "The communion of saints in the companionship model forges intergenerational

[1] Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 78.
[2] Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 80.

bonds across time that sustain faith in strange new times and places. Surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, we cherish in very different circumstances what they cared enough to live and die for."[3]

The second model looks at the martyrs and saints as heavenly intercessors around the throne of God who manipulate heavenly strings for the living. This model, according to Johnson, became operative in the late third century until the late fifth century. A shift occurred in the understanding of the saints by the living from "a partnership of hope" to being "intercessors in a structure of power and neediness."[4] The emphasis now was laid on their intercessory role. The living became the clients of the saints who now took the role of patrons. Christians believed that saints were regularly capable of performing miracles due their proximity with God. The saints cured the sick, countered famine, quelled fires, defeated enemies and so on. The saints presented petitions on behalf of the living to God in order to win favors for them in the divine courts.

Johnson's categorization echoes what other scholars in the discipline have gleaned as the relationship between the saints and the living. A consideration of Johnson's models raises a question about a possibility of yet another model. Although I leave analysis for the subsequent chapters in this work, I point out here that Johnson's two models merit our keener attention. Johnson's models are based on communion *with* the saints. If I look rather at the communion *of* the saints, a possibility of a new model opens up. This new model will take into account the entire holy people of God, living and dead, as a family of people bound together by their common existence and the blessings that they share through their relationship with Christ. A

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[3] Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 85.

[4] Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 86. We do well to read Johnson's insights within her literary agenda of a strong feminist orientation. She writes on the framework of feminist theology, with quite an explicit intention in mind, namely, "to interpret the symbol [Communion of Saints] in such a way that it will serve the practical and spiritual well being of all women, releasing redemptive possibilities of life." *Friends of God and Prophets*, 40.

family model readily fits the African cultural framework and is rooted in an authentic African worldview. Suggesting the possibility for another model will create a hermeneutical and theological room for engagement with African history, social grammar, and cultural genius.

3.2 Communion of Saints as spiritual fellowship among believers

Christian believers profess their faith in the Communion of the Saints as set out in the ninth article of the Apostles Creed. Pope Leo XIII's magisterial document *Mirae Caritatis* of 1902 is the first explicit papal teaching on the doctrine that takes the approach of fellowship among believers. The pontiff explains that the *Communion of Saints* is

> Nothing but the mutual communication of help, expiation, prayers, blessings, among all the faithful, who, whether they have already attained to the heavenly country, or are detained in the purgatorial fire, or are yet exiles here on earth, all enjoy the common franchise of that city whereof Christ is the head, and the constitution is charity.[5]

The pontiff's teaching highlights three traditional levels of relationships and interdependence within the membership in the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. These levels are comprised of the Church Militant (Christian believers on earth), the Church Penitent (those undergoing purification in Purgatory in preparation for heaven), and the Church Triumphant (those already in heaven, the saints). In this approach it is understood that the members on earth invoke the saints in heaven and pray also for the souls in purgatory. The saints in heaven pray for the members on earth and the souls in purgatory; the saints obtain graces for the members on earth and an alleviation of suffering for the souls in purgatory.[6]

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[5] Leo XIII, Encyclical "Mirae Caritatis" cited in Jules Lintelo and F. M. De Zulueta, *The Divine Educator; or, Guide to the Promotion of Frequent and Daily Communion In Educational Establishments*, (New York: P. J. Kennedy & sons, 1912).

[6] Stanley Joseph Ott's study of the communion of saints is a typical example of the literary genre that focuses on "the uniting bond of the Communion of Saints." See his *Opinions of Modern Theologians on the Membership in the*

The first section of this study takes this approach of fellowship or spiritual bonds among Christian believers into consideration as its point of departure. This approach will enable me to examine the anthropological considerations contained in the fellowship among the members of Christ's body on earth and their ancestors in faith in heaven, the saints.

The doctrine originated from the baptismal creed as practiced by Christian believers at the end of the fourth century. As such it originated out of a context in which there was a need to establish a spiritual fellowship between an individual Christian and the larger community of believers.

3.3 The origins of the term *Communion of Saints*

It is not easy to trace the exact origins of the *communion sanctorum*. Johnson refers to it as "an elusive creedal phrase."[7] Different views and a variety of arguments have been advanced in an attempt to establish the origins of the expression.

In his monumental study of *The Creeds of Christendom With a History and Critical Notes* (first published in 1877) Professor Phillip Schaff has given us insightful historical details that may well serve as a solid reference point in our examination of the origins of the creed. Schaff writes that:

> As to the origin of the Apostles' Creed, it no doubt gradually grew out of the confession of Peter, Matthew 16:16, which furnished its nucleus (the article on Jesus Christ), and out of the baptismal formula, which determined the Trinitarian order and arrangement. It can not be traced to an individual author. It is the product of the Western Catholic Church (as the Nicene Creed is that of the Eastern Church) within the first four centuries. It is not of primary, apostolic, but of secondary, ecclesiastical inspiration. It is not a word of God to men, but a word

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Communion of Saints, Excerpta ex dissertatione ad Lauream in Facultate Theologica Pontifiae Universitatis Gregorianae (Romae 1995), 10.

[7] Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 94.

> of men to God, in response to his revelation. It was originally and essentially a baptismal confession, growing out of the inner life and practical needs of early Christianity. It was explained to the catechumens at the last stage of their preparation, professed by them at baptism, often repeated, with the Lord's Prayer, for private devotion, and afterwards introduced into public service. It was called by the ante-Nicene fathers 'the rule of faith,' 'the rule of truth,' 'the apostolic tradition,' 'the apostolic preaching,' afterwards 'the symbol of faith.'[8]

Schaff's analysis provides us with the larger historical picture of the creed. Several points that are relevant to this study emerge, some of which I shall analyze in the subsequent chapters. It is of particular interest that the creed grew out of the ordinary faith and life of the Christian believers of the western Church from apostolic times.

Scholars generally agree with the basic facts of the origins of the phrase *communion of saints*, except for slight differences and emphases. Esler, for example, argues that the *communion of saints* made its earliest appearance in the minutes of a regional council convened at Nîmes, Gaul, in 394 CE. Around the same time, Esler argues, the expression was incorporated into the Apostles Creed: "*Credo in… sanctorum communionem*" ("I believe in… communion of saints"). According to Esler the expression was a late insertion in the Apostles Creed, a fact that is authenticated by Nicetas of Remesiana's commentary, which appeared toward the end of fourth century CE.[9]

The theologian Robert Wilken argues like Schaff that *communion of saints* originated in the Latin West, and therefore it ought to be understood within a Latin rather than a Greek context.[10] Its origin from East or West is of little importance to our purpose at this point. What is relevant rather is whether *communion of saints* should be taken to be masculine or neuter, that is,

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[8] Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom With a History and Critical Notes* (New York: Harper, 1919), 16.

[9] Phillip F. Esler, *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 193.

[10] Robert Louis Wilken, "Sanctorum Communio: For Evangelicals and Catholics Together" in *Pro Ecclesia* (Vol. 11, 2001), 159-166.

whether *sanctorum* refers to holy persons or holy things (the sacraments, especially the Eucharist). It is not a resolved matter among scholars.

John N.D. Kelly gives us a more comprehensive treatment of the origins of the term "Communion of Saints" which may serve as a summary. Kelly first points out the uncertainty that surrounds the origins of the expression, but he says it most certainly first appeared in an imperial rescript of 338 CE and in a canon of a synod held at Nîmes between 394 and 396 CE. Kelly argues that *sanctorum communio* is a Latin version of the Greek expression *koinōnia tōn hagiōn* that originally gained a popular liturgical use in the East. This expression, Kelly writes, had a sense of "participation in the blessings (or 'good things,' neuter plural) of salvation" especially participation in the Eucharist.[11]

Kelly argues that Nicetas and the Christian West interpreted *sanctorum* as masculine and therefore emphasized the communion with the martyrs and the saints in a more restricted sense, as well as all Christian believers and the angels and the Old Testament patriarchs. Kelly points out that

> … a quite unambiguous allusion to the sacraments crops up in the sermon *Symbolum Graeca lingua est* which dates from the Carolingian era. This explains the clause as meaning "holy communion through the invocation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in which all the faithful ought to participate every Lord's day.[12]

The neuter application of the expression was equally in use in the West, as can be gleaned from Jerome in a rescript of Emperor Theodosius dated 388, which applies *communione sanctorum* (in reference to the Eucharist), and found explicitly in Abelard's statement:

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[11] John N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (New York: David McKay Company Inc., 1972), 388-97. Nicetas used the term to describe holy persons, namely "patriarchs, prophets, martyrs and all other righteous men who have lived or are now alive, or shall live in time to come." (Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 391.)

[12] Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 393.

> . . . The communion which makes the saints into saints whose sainthood is confirmed through the participation in the divine sacrament… Yet, we can also interpret *sanctorum* in a neutral sense thus referring to the sacrament of bread and wine.[13]

Theodore of Mopsuestia in the East offered a rich vision of the expression by combining both the masculine and the neuter application. His interpretation and explanation of *sanctorum communio* and clear emphasis on communion between the Church and Christ are evident in the following quotation:

> Since by a new birth they have become perfect in a single body, they are now also strengthened as in a single body by communion by the body of the Lord; and, in concord, peace, and the devotion to good, they all come to be one. . . Thus we will unite in communion with the holy mysteries and by that communion we will be joined to our head, Christ our Lord, of whom we believe we attain communion with the divine nature.[14]

3.4. Some theological perspectives on the phrase "communion of saints"

When the popularity of the saints grew rapidly from around the sixth century through the Middle Ages, it was necessary for Christian teachers to voice their guidance. The ambiguity of the phrase "communion of saints" in Latin lingered on through the centuries. A sample of some of the major voices is in order. In the Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas depended on the neuter sense and described the phrase by creating an intrinsic connection between the two meanings when he explained that

> Because all the faithful form one body, the good of one is shared by all others. We thus believe that there exists in the Church a communion of goods or of good (*bonorum*). Yet, the most important part is Christ because he is the head. Thus the good which is Christ is shared among all Christians and this sharing is

[13] *Patrologia Latina*, 17, 629ff.

[14] *Hom. cat. 16. 13, ed. Tonneau-Devreesse*, 555, cited in Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology* (London: Routledge, 2004), 329.

> accomplished through the sacraments in which the sufferings of Christ take effect.[15]

According to St. Thomas, Christians constitute the body of Christ by sharing in the "communion of good or of goods." His interpretation and explanation of *sanctorum communion* with a clear emphasis on the place of sacraments is evident in the following quotation:

> Among the other things that the Apostles believed and transmitted is that in the Church there is a communion of goods, and that is what is called: sanctorum communio. Thus the good of Christ is being communicated to all Christians, just as the excellence of the head is communicated to all members. This communication takes place through the sacraments of the Church.[16]

Thomas Aquinas' interpretation was echoed by Robert Bellarmine in the 16th century. Bellarmine famously referred to the Church as a "perfect society" that possessed a transparent, hierarchical structure.[17] Bellarmine also had the other features of the Church in mind: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Regarding the apostolic feature, he saw in it the connection with the Communion of Saints:

> Fourthly, it is said (that the Church) is apostolic. This word is added in the symbol which is sung in the Mass and it is derived from these words of the Apostles' Creed: *sanctorum communionem*. There is, namely, in the Church, *sanctorum comunio*, because the Church is something like a live body, and therefore co-ordinated within itself so that all members are dependent on the head and participate in all goods which flow from the head to the members.[18]

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[15] Pierre Mandonnet, (ed.), *Oposcula Omnia*, vol. 4 (Paris: Lethieleux, 1972), 381 cited in Hans Urs Von Balthasar, "Editorial: The Meaning of *Communion of Saints*" in *Communio: International Catholic Review* (Summer 1988): 161. Interestingly this insight has been included in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* almost verbatim. See *Catechism*, # 947.

[16] *Summa Theologica*, Pars. III, Inq. II, Tract. II, Quaest. II, Tit. I, XVI-XVII.

[17] See for example Gerard Mannion and Lewis Seymour Mudge, (eds.) *The Routledge companion to the Christian church* (London ; New York : Routledge, 2008), 236.

[18] *Operum Roberti Bellarmini Ex Societ. Iesu, S.R.E. Cardinalis, Tomus Septimus, Id Est Novende Cim Varii, Argumenti Opuscula*, Cologne, 1617, p. 1191 cited in Stephen Benko, *The Meaning of Sanctorum Communio* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1964), 115.

Karl Barth in his *Credo* links *sancta ecclesia catholica* with *sanctorum communio.* Barth includes both the *sancti* and the *sancta* and cautions against emphasizing one approach against the other. He writes:

> The *vocatio interna* rests on *vocatio externa*; it is to this that the *sancta* points. To be in the Church can only mean to be in *grace*, and therefore in participation of those treasures entrusted to the Church. If we were to speak in isolation of *sancti*, we should, in interpretation of the conception of the Church, be approaching perilously near the congregational idea, and not stop till we landed at the idea of the religious association.[19]

Barth, as a leading theological voice of Reformed Protestantism in the 20th century, believed that in *sanctorum communio,* the faithful are gathered by God's grace into a *communion* by virtue of the *sancta* (their participation in the holy things) and become the *sancti* (communion with the saints).[20]

Therefore the meaning of "Communion of Saints" is not obvious. It may be interpreted to mean participation in holy things (*sancta*), that is, the sacraments, especially the Eucharist; or communion with the saints and martyrs (*sancti*). We can now see how these interpretations have influenced the official position of the Church concerning the doctrine.

3.5 Communion of Saints in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has a wide and encompassing vision of communion of the saints, one that incorporates the double meanings we encountered from the fourth century. It distinguishes two kinds of communions:

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[19] Karl Barth, (tr. J. Strathearn McNab) *Credo*: *A Presentation of The Chief Problems Of Dogmatics With Reference To The Apostles' Creed; Sixteen Lectures Delivered At The University Of Utrecht In February And March, 1935* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1936), 193. Barth had a significant theological influence on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. When at 21 Bonhoeffer completed his brilliant and ground-breaking doctoral thesis, *Sanctorum Communio*, Barth praised the dissertation as a "theological miracle." See Michael Balfour, *Withstanding Hitler,* London; (New York: Routledge, 1988), 216.

[20] See also Benko, *The Meaning of Sanctorum Communio,* 135.

- First, of spiritual goods (949-953): includes communion of faith, communion of sacraments, communion of charisms, and communion of charity.
- Second, the communion of the church of heaven and earth (954-959): includes the “three states of the Church” (mentioned without explicit description); intercession of the saints, communion with the saints, and communion with the dead.

The Catechism summarizes the double meaning of communion of saints. It refers “first to the ‘holy things’ (*sancta*), above all the Eucharist, by which the unity of believers, who form one body in Christ, is both represented and brought about" (no. 960). Furthermore, the Catechism explains that "communion of saints" refers also to the communion of "holy persons" (*sancti*) in Christ who "died for all," so that what each one does or suffers in and for Christ bears fruit for all (no. 961).

By incorporating the two meanings (communion of holy people – masculine, and communion of holy things – neuter) into this important source of the Church’s teachings, we see continuity in the understanding of the phrase from the early centuries. The Catechism notes this important connection between the double meanings as thereby providing a rich hermeneutical platform on which the old interpretation of communion of saints can be linked to the post-conciliar mentality.

The Catechism goes on to describe the traditional understanding of the tripartite Church who form the one Church of Christ, with the saints performing their intercessory role.

> We believe in the communion of all the faithful of Christ, those who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are being purified, and the blessed in heaven, all together forming one Church; and we believe that in this communion, the merciful love of God and his saints is always [attentive] to our prayers (no. 962).

The Catechism recognizes the identity of Christ's followers as holy. It states: "The Church, then, is 'the holy People of God', and her members are called 'saints'" (no. 823). It then proceeds to combine the double understanding of the communion of saints as always applied since the fourth century. The Catechism weaves the double meanings in its description of how the two meanings have been applied in concrete situations from the inception of the phrase:

> Sancta sanctis! ("God's holy gifts for God's holy people") is proclaimed by the celebrant in most Eastern liturgies during the elevation of the holy Gifts before the distribution of communion. The faithful (sancti) are fed by Christ's holy body and blood (sancta) to grow in the communion of the Holy Spirit (koinonia) and to communicate it to the world. (no. 948)

The Catechism reiterates the fundamental premises of the faithful, who are constituted into a communion of the Holy Spirit, made possible by the holy gifts in the context of the Eucharistic celebration, and directed toward the cosmic world.

3.6 Communion of Saints in *Lumen Gentium*

The Second Vatican Council provided an opportunity for the Church to try to achieve two objectives which were integrally related: to renew itself (*aggiornamento*) and to promote Christian unity.

When we consider the Church's teaching at the Second Vatican Council regarding the communion of saints, as Johnson has rightly pointed out, it was the first time that the Church presented a systematic teaching about the doctrine at a conciliar level.[21] The Church was aware of the problems, distortions, criticisms, and accusations labeled against it, especially since the

[21] Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 114. When Johnson writes that it was "the first time it presented the first systematic teaching about the saints ever given" she does not mention the fact that Pope Leo XIII made some modest attempts to present a systematic teaching on the saints in his encyclical letter *Mirae Caritatis* of 1902 that I already referred to in this study.

Reformation.[22] Johnson also observes that the Council did not respond to the perceived criticisms and accusations directly. Rather the Church reformed the platform on which the thinking and practices of devotion to and communion with the saints were made possible. The Church made three moves as follows:

1. The council connected the teaching on the saints to the broader theology of the Church. The theology of the church itself was refreshed by biblical and early Christian sources.
2. The council developed the teachings in a Trinitarian framework centered on the mercy of God in Christ.
3. In view of the traditional practice, the Council recommended a new version of the companionship relationship while criticizing the excesses that had gathered around the practices of patronage.[23]

The manner in which these three moves were concretized can be seen in some significant documents of the Council which were particularly instrumental in echoing the post-conciliar thoughts of the Church regarding the *c*ommunion of saints. The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (*Lumen gentium*, 50, hereafter *LG*) and the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 8), for example, highlight the eschatological significance of the saints.

One of the significant shifts in Catholic theology that is reflected in *LG* has been a movement away from understanding the church as possessing a transparent, hierarchical

[22] Jon Sweeney, for example, represents many Evangelical Protestants who for centuries claimed that (i) Practicing devotion to the saints and many forms of piety in a manner that stand in the way of faith in Christ alone is meaningless superstitions, unnecessary, and harmful; (ii) Anything saint-related is extra-biblical, post-New Testament, and dangerous; (iii) Veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary is idolatrous. See Jon Sweeney, *The Lure of Saints: A Protestant Experience of Catholic Tradition* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2005), 6-12.

[23] Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 114.

structure. In that vision, the pope stood at the apex of a pyramid with the laity forming the base line. Chapter 2 of *LG* seeks to recover a different understanding of the church by emphasizing the sacramental and creedal bonds between all Catholic believers. The document embraces a vision of the church as a "community" of the People of God "brought into operation through the sacraments and the exercise of virtues." The change in emphasis from a legal-institutional definition of the church towards a theological conception and definition cleared the ground for a better realization of communion.

Moreover, *LG* (in many articles, for example 1, 5, 11, 20, 40, and 51) calls on all Christian believers to strive to be holy, which is a clarion call that corresponds with the original Pauline meaning of saints. This call to holiness broadens the identity of Christian believers as a people on a pilgrimage, a holy community.

LG ought to be read in its wider ecclesiological perspective. It raises certain key ideas that show the Council embraced certain old concepts and practices with a view of making *communion* both possible and practical. The concepts included (i) The idea of the People of God; (ii) The collegiality of the bishops and the primacy of the Pope; (iii) An improved understanding of the individual Churches in relation to the universal Church; (iv) The ecumenical use of the concept "Church" and its openness to other religions; (v) The question of the specific nature of the Catholic Church which is expressed in the formula according to which the "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church -- of which the creed speaks -- *subsistit* in *Ecclesia catholica*."[24]

[24] Cf. "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church: Commentary on the Document" issued by Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, available at the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_commento-responsa_en.html

In order to better understand how these concepts are organically linked to the Communion of Saints I need to highlight the salient points of the document that specifically address the saints. Numbers 50 and 51 of Chapter 7 of the document are particularly relevant for this purpose.

The document issues a comprehensive recognition of the relationship between the pilgrim Church and the heavenly Church, as well as the humble acts of devotion of Christian believers of all times:

> In full consciousness of this communion of the whole Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, the Church in its pilgrim members, from the very earliest days of the Christian religion, has honored with great respect the memory of the dead (no. 50).

The document goes on to make a clear statement in regard to the place and value of the saints in the life of Christian believers. According to Raymond Bulman and Frederick Parrella, the document quotes directly from the Council of Trent[25] in establishing the legitimacy of Christians' ritual practices and encouraging them to express their love to the saints who are united with them by the grace of Christ:

> It is most fitting, therefore, that we love those friends and co-heirs of Jesus Christ who are also our brothers and outstanding benefactors, and that we give due thanks to God for them, humbly invoking them, and having recourse to their prayers, their aid and help in obtaining from God through his Son, Jesus Christ, … the benefits we need (no. 50).

The document makes a terminological clarification that was also at the center of early church's ritual performance: the *dulia – latria* distinction. The Council, inspired by Augustine's insights, reiterated that veneration is respect, honor, and devotion (*latria*) paid to the saintly deceased

[25] Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella, (eds.), *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 69.

members of the Body of Christ and is distinct from the respect, honor, and adoration which is reserved to God alone – that which is properly called *worship* (*dulia*). The council said:

> Our communion with these in heaven, provided that it is understood in the full light of faith, in no way diminishes the worship of adoration given to God the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit; on the contrary, it greatly enriches it. For if we continue to love one another and to join in praising the Most Holy Trinity – all of us who are sons of God and form one family in Christ (cf. Heb. 3:6) – we will be faithful to the deepest vocation of the Church and will share in a foretaste of the liturgy of perfect glory (no. 51).

The communion between Christian believers and saints is made possible by the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies, leads, and enriches Christian believers with virtues through the sacraments and the ministries. The Holy Spirit also bestows graces upon Christian believers of every rank, graces that enable them to fulfill their duties and responsibilities (ch. 1, 12).

The basis of veneration of the saints is made clear: the saints are intrinsically joined to Christ who makes them one with the Church on earth and provides an eschatological destiny for all the faithful. The Church on earth, following centuries-old practices, venerates the memory of the saints; the saints on their part reveal the divine face of God.

Conclusion of part one

To conclude this first part of this study, the salient points must be reiterated here. I set out to study the theological and historical principles that support the doctrine of communion of saints. It was important that I examine the doctrine sociologically within the context of the changing, complex religious terrains of the Graeco-Roman society and the Jewish cultural and religious traditions.

From my survey of literature dealing with communion of saints, I found that from the New Testament times, at least in theory, all followers of Christ were sometimes known as saints. In practice, however, Christian believers accorded a relatively small number of people the title of "saint" and venerated them. The saints became Christians' heroes in faith.

To understand the rituals which coalesced specifically around the martyrs and subsequently around saints, it is essential to view them in an eschatological perspective. Believers wanted certain people to be recognized as saints. This desire was heightened by complex factors, namely the religious climate that harbored a strong eschatological hope for union with God, admiration of certain pre-Christian Jewish "saints", and the society's religious practices immortalizing their heroes.

The first believers to be revered as saints were martyrs who died because of their faith in Jesus from the New Testament times through the first centuries of Christianity under Roman persecution. Over the next few centuries, however, sainthood was extended to various categories of people who also, in their unique ways, had defended the faith and led pious lives.

An important point emerges from the observations regarding how Christian believers conducted their cults of martyrs and saints. There were no set rules to guide the Christian believers' ritual practices beforehand. The expressions of martyrdom in the Old Testament historical and cultural contexts influenced the language, thoughts, and cultural practices of Christian believers, and some cultural traits were absorbed into Christian religious attitudes.

Moreover, right from the beginning of Patristic Fathers' teachings regarding beliefs about the afterlife, Christian teachers held varying, and at times even opposing beliefs. At times Christians spontaneously began to perform certain practices, such as veneration of the martyrs

and saints, under the influence of pagan ideas and customs. It took Christian teachers such as Polycarp, Jerome, and Augustine to speak out loudly and clearly to defend Christian rituals that were agreeable to majority of believers and to use disputed issues as opportunities to broaden Christian teachings and project Christian theological ideals onto newer planes. Despite the inconsistencies, illogicalities, and the varying expressions of eschatological beliefs in the patristic eschatology, and questions regarding the veneration of saints, there was an overriding emphasis on the value of communion among the members of the Church that ultimately shaped the platform on which the doctrine of communion of saints was developed.

The public veneration of saints took many forms. Two pervasive modes that we examined were liturgical veneration and the cult of relics. Christians believed that saints had supernatural powers because at death the saints had been judged worthy of immediate entrance into the kingdom of God. Since they were residents in the courts of heaven, the faithful could seek their intercession and preserve a hope of a reunion in heaven.

In articulating the ideal-typical relationship with the saints, we found that there are mainly two models that have been systematically advanced for the relationship between Christian believers and saints. The first model, developed in the age of the martyrs, was that of companions; the second model, developed between the third and fifth centuries, was that of intercessors. I saw a need to propose another model which I call “a family model” that can accommodate other cultures beyond those in which the first ideas of communion emerged.

I next examined the origins of the expression Communion of Saints. I highlighted certain theological perspectives of the phrase, and discussed how the two major sources of the Church doctrine, namely, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the documents of the Second

Vatican Council, have preserved the doctrine of communion of saints. I found that although the origins of the expression were ambiguous, the ambiguity seems to have been resolved when the two interpretations were applied concurrently. By incorporating and preserving the two meanings (communion of holy people – masculine, and communion of holy things – neuter), we found that there is continuity in the understanding of the phrase from the early centuries.

In the next chapter, I will begin with the assumption that just as the Christian saints are integral to Christian worship, the African ancestors are integral to the traditional African social structure. Two questions come to mind. First, does not the seeming exclusivity that characterizes the interpretation of the doctrine of communion of saints jeopardize the Church's capacity to enter into dialogue with other cultures? Second, considering that culture is a man-made construct, as are the ceremonies that go with it, can such awareness encourage the Church leadership to empower other non-western cultures (such as those in Africa) to share in Christ's saving acts without having to relinquish their cultural heritage?

These are some of the question that I carry from the present chapter. Therefore as I move to the next chapter, I will need to analyze the observations from the present chapter within a much wider liturgical, ecclesial, and theological context in order to better understand the parallel between the veneration of African ancestors and the veneration of Christian saints.

PART TWO

THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE OF THE SOUTHERN LUO

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined some knowledge, behavior, ideas and, objects of the early Christians in regard to their link with their deceased members. These practices constituted the common heritage of the early Christians regarding what would be passed on to succeeding generations of Christians.

I specifically described how Christianity treated the desires of its faithful regarding the afterlife. In other words, I looked into certain aspects of Christianity's earliest attempts to establish and manifest its desire for continuance beyond death. Some of these attempts were expressed in the doctrine of communion of saints, which was the main focus of the chapter.

In the present chapter I will turn my attention to the African continent and try to look at how such aspirations of continuance of life have been treated. How have the people in African societies manifested their desire for continuance of life beyond death? We can suppose that Africans learned and observed certain practices related to death as members of the various societies and not necessarily as adherents of an organized religion such as Christianity.

Two observable ways of continuance in the African tradition that form the basis of this chapter may be mentioned at this point: 1) There is a spiritual continuance in which individual members of the society join the world of the spirits and ancestors and continue living beyond their earthly physical lives; 2) There is the biological continuance in which individual members of the society are understood to continue living with the society in and through their offspring.

The mutual obligation of care between parents and their children ensures the individual continuance beyond death and it is also vital for the survival of the entire society.

Because of the size, unique world view, and complexity of the African continent, I will narrow my analysis and observations to one ethnic group of African peoples: the Luo of Kenya.[1] I will examine the manifestations of the human desire for spiritual continuance of life beyond death among the Luo. The Luo culture is well known from many anthropological studies. I will limit my inquiry to one strong element of Luo life, one that touches most closely the Paschal mystery of Christ: its way of celebrating death. In the funeral customs of the Luo, I will describe their beliefs surrounding death and the spiritual ramifications that follow.

[1] The Luo who occupy parts of the shores of Lake Victoria and other parts of western Kenya are usually referred to as "Southern Luo." This designation will become clearer in the course of the development of the present section.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 A CONCISE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE LUO

4.1 An overview of the Luo people

In order to show the distinctiveness of the Luo culture and describe its way of celebrating death, it is important for me to provide some preliminary information to locate the Luo in their cultural and historical environment in order to provide an overview of the Luo for readers not familiar with this ethnic group.

The Luo of Kenya presently live in the western part of Kenya in the regions around Lake Victoria. They are to be found in Migori, Homa Bay, Bondo, Kisumu, Rachuonyo, Siaya, and Nyando districts. According to the 2010 national census results, they number 11 million, which makes them the third-largest ethnic group in Kenya. They account for about 13% of the total Kenyan population.

Some other groups of Luo people can be found in northern and eastern Uganda, Northern Tanzania and Southern Sudan. Although the Luo were separated by the administrative boundaries of countries since the Berlin Conference in 1884, the Luo claim one origin, as I will illustrate below. They speak *Dholuo* (literally “mouth of Luo”).

The Luo are well-known for their fishing activities. It is the dominant occupation, given their historical origins associated with the River Nile and their close proximity to the largest fresh water lake in Africa—Lake Victoria. The western part of Kenya is generally a broad stretch of land with an even surface and unreliable rainfall patterns; it is not particularly conducive for financially viable farming activities. Nevertheless the Luo engage in small-scale agriculture. In fact in almost every village and home there is some form of subsistence farming. With the

fluctuating rainfall patterns and generally warm weather conditions, the Luo country is not materially rich compared to other parts of Kenya. The highlands and the Rift Valley, for example, are wealthier. As in all parts of rural communities of Kenya and in most of sub-Saharan Africa, the Luo are under increasing adaptive pressure from the effects of globalization. They are faced with the daily practical challenges of needing an increased food supply, generating income, and safeguarding against the risks and shocks of life's uncertainties. Consequently the Luo are engaging in multiple livelihood strategies which also require them to change their traditional cultural practices to adapt to new circumstances.

An afterlife and a supreme creator, *Nyasaye* (God), are two of the most important elements in the Luo cultural belief system.[1] Closely related to belief in Nyasaye is the first major ritual in the life of a Luo "Juogi".[2] It is important to emphasize at this point (and it will become clearer in the course of this chapter), that religion and culture among the Luo, as in all African societies, are interwoven with the rest of life. Sometimes it becomes a daunting task to distinguish between what is purely religious and what is just part of the cultural complex in the rituals of the community or in acts arbitrarily performed by individual members of the community.

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[1] I will offer more details later in this section. Suffice it to mention at this point that there is a whole concept of "Jok" that is central to the understanding the Luo spiritual life. This concept, used to refer to God or divinity, is also found in other societies that are related to the Luo. Some authors such as Audrey Butt point out that the concept is less prominent among the Luo of Kenya. Butt explains that the concept illustrates more explicitly the theism of societies related to the Luo: for example among the Shilluk it refers to the "remote and supreme creator"; among the Lango and Acholi it refers to the "omnipresent spirit manifested in many different phenomena," and among the Nuer and Dinka it is the "spirits of the dead". See Audrey Butt, *The Nilotes of the Sudan and Uganda* (London: International African Institute, 1964), 179.

[2] "Juogi" (plural of "juok") is the naming ceremony that takes place between birth and before the completion of a child's second birthday. In the course of this study it will become clear how "juogi" is an important feature in the life of a Luo. In the mean time, I should mention a Luo practice in naming children: an ancestor appears to one or more members of a family in a dream when a new baby joins a family. The child is usually named after that particular ancestor.

Most cultural activities of the Luo have religious meaning in them. However, to a large extent many of the Luo cultural practices and beliefs that were sources of bonds and cohesion within the people did not withstand the impact of Christianity and western civilization. The degree to which Christianity and Western influence took root in Luo culture remains a matter of speculation to both scholars and casual observers. In any case, some cultural practices indicate that certain traditional beliefs persist in spite of outside cultural influences. For example, like many other African peoples, the Luo have a relatively strong cult of the dead or ancestor cult.

As all African peoples, the Luo perform various rituals during the major stages of the life of an individual member of the society. Whereas many other ethnic groups circumcise their young boys and girls at puberty to mark their transition into adulthood, the Luo do not circumcise their young. Instead they traditionally remove six lower front teeth as an initiation rite. However, this cultural trait has largely been discontinued since the early 1960s.

Like many other African communities, today the Luo have incorporated Western cultural practices into their life, resulting in the disappearance of many of their traditional customs. One cultural trait that perdures and perhaps makes the Luo unique among the various peoples of Kenya is the manner in which they care for the deceased members of the community. It is that particular trait that makes them a suitable choice for the study of African traditional practices that underlie ancestral veneration. The Luo painstakingly devote much attention to funeral rituals, unlike other surrounding ethnic groups. Their funerals are typically characterized by dramatic display of public emotions and feasting. Like many other African peoples, funerals tend to be grand celebrations where multitudes of attendees are entertained with plenty of food and drink. The Luo are known to be particularly keen on their funeral customs and dramaturgy. This cultural trait provides us with a window to look at their entrenched attitudes and beliefs.

Accordingly, in this chapter I will examine the manifestations of the Luo's desire for continuance of life beyond death by analyzing Luo funeral customs. I will do this by combining the functionalist and symbolic interactionist approaches to the study of culture.[3] Combining these theoretical perspectives will enable me to conceptualize and interpret the Luo as a society, the social forces that come to play in their rituals and the meaning of their human behavior as individuals and as members of the society.

4.1.1 Literature on the Luo history

Among the post-colonial historians, Professor Bethwell Allan Ogot is the most eminent authority in Luo history. His works have been referred to again and again in reconstructing the migration history and settlement of the Luo. In his *History of the Southern Luo: Migration and settlement 1500-1900*, he studies the four most prominent and comprehensive existing works on the Nilotic people: Crazzolara's *The Lwoo*, Seligman's *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*, Westermann's *The Shilluk People*, and Hofmayer's *Die Shilluk*.[4] Ogot's scholarship, perhaps because of the advantage of being a Luo himself, is more focused on the Southern Luo with their clearly

[3] I use these sociological theories and systems as a background theoretical tool of critical analysis of the Luo society. My purpose is to explain how the Luo people organize themselves to operate effectively as a social unit. Functionalism (as advanced by Malinowski) focuses on how culture functions to meet the needs of individuals rather than society as a whole whereas symbolic interactionism attempts to explain how individual members of the society choose their actions based on perceptions of themselves and of others. (Radcliffe's structural functionalism may be considered as a variant of Malinowski's functionalism since it tries to set itself apart by emphasizing the interpretation of society as a structure with interrelated parts.) The pioneering European sociologists, however, also offered a broad conceptualization of the fundamentals of society and its workings. Their views form the basis for today's theoretical perspectives which provide sociologists with an orienting framework— philosophical positions— for asking certain kinds of questions about society and its people. Studies of these sociological systems can be found in Francesca M. Cancian, "Varieties of Functional Analysis", in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), 29-43; Frances Christie and Karl Maton, eds., *Disciplinarity: Functional Linguistic and Sociological Perspectives* (London; New York: Continuum, 2011); Don Martindale, *The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 441-500; N. J. Demerath III and Richard A. Peterson (eds.), *System, Change and Conflict: A Reader on Contemporary Sociological Theory and the Debate Over Functionalism* (New York: The Free Press, 1967); Anthony Elliott (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Social Theory* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010).

[4] Bethwell Allan Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo: Migration and settlement, 1500-1900* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967).

described peculiarities, than is the work of the other four scholars. The works of the four, nevertheless, are revered by other scholars and offer details on all the Nilotic sub-groups, even though they are less rigorous compared to Ogot's work.

For a comprehensive study of the Luo, one needs to study these major works and incorporate the studies of more recent authors such as Butt's *The Nilotes of the Sudan and Uganda* (1952), particularly as they highlight the nuances and application of earlier studies and show the interactions of the Luo with other societies. Indeed Seligman avers rightly that

> An ethnographic survey of any group of people should not merely give an account of the main physical and cultural characters of that group but should also provide the data for the study of their relationship to each other as well as to tribes outside of the area surveyed.[5]

Heeding Seligman's call, we begin our exploration by looking at the identity of the Luo and focusing on their relationship with the other African societies that surrounded them. A useful place to begin is in the linguistic families that Africa is particularly famous for.

4.1.2 The Luo and other African peoples

The continent of Africa is a complex maze of diverse peoples and cultures. Yet scholars have established certain methodologies to understand this maze. One of the methodologies that was applied in the early 19th century to conceptualize the wide spectrum of Africa's ethnic groups, sometimes referred to as "tribes,"[6] is based on language. This practice has been successfully

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[5] C. G. Seligman and Brenda Seligman, *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1932), xi.

[6] "Tribe" is a problematic social construct. The renowned psychologist Gordon Allport has drawn our attention to the universal learned human tendency found in human groups that in their attempts to comprehend more simply the complexities in other groups, they develop overgeneralizations. It is that overgeneralization that leads Allport to develop a paradigm of "ethnic prejudice" which he defines as an "antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group as a whole or toward an individual because he is a member of that group." See Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 9-27. Some anthropologists and social scientists agree with in Allport's analysis and in fact

done to identify the Europeans belonging to the Roman, Celtic, Latin, Nordic and Slavic tongues. Collins's point provides a reliable criterion: "language remains the ultimate marker whose basic structure endures despite changes in culture and society."[7]

Professor Joseph H. Greenberg pioneered the studies that identified four principal linguistic families in Africa as Niger-Congo (Bantu), Afro-Asiatic (Cushites), Nilo-Saharan (Nilotes), and Khoisan.[8] These language groups represent African societies that existed distinctly and independent of each other. At the same time it is possible that the various groups had some common ancestry in the distant past. The Bantu and the Nilotes have been highlighted as examples of such possibility. Marsh and Kingsworth, for example, tell us that the Nilo-Hamitic

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think that "tribe" is another form of ethnic prejudice. Such scholars have pointed out the offensive connotation that is inherent in the use of "tribe" to refer to African social groups that use a single language, religious tradition, have common cultural practices, and living in a given territory. Such scholars maintain that "tribe" (1) was in widespread use since 19th century as a western and colonial terminology that was applied indiscriminately to refer to African peoples as conservatively primitive (or backward) and savage; (2) is an unacceptable racial stereotype that considers African social groups as inferior thereby obscuring Africa's rich and complex history and potentials at the same time justifying Western domination. Professor Ehret in his sharply pointed rejection of the term says that "Clearly 'tribe' is an appellation Europeans have reserved for non-European ethnic groups and nationalities and most especially those of Africa. So pervasive was the use of 'tribe' during the colonial era that even Africans themselves often unthinkingly use that word or its equivalent today when speaking English or other European languages." Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 9. Authors who categorically reject the use of the term are numerous, including Aidan Southall, "The Illusion of Tribe," in Peter Gutkind, ed., *The Passing of Tribal Man in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 28-51; Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, Richard Lobban and Linda Zangari, '"Tribe': A Socio-Political Analysis," in *Ufahamu* (UCLA) VII, 1 (1976), 143-165; A. B. M. Mafeje, "Tribalism" and Okwudiba Nnoli, "Ethnicity" in Joel Krieger (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). In recognition of the ongoing studies on "tribe" and for the sake of methodological consistency in the present study, I will avoid the use of the term "tribe" and instead refer to the Luo (and other African social groups) as an "ethnic (from ετηνικοσ [= national]) group". Later I will show the relevance and appropriateness of "ethnification" as advanced by Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local*, (Marykoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 23-25. "Ethnic" terminology is also recommended by other prominent anthropologists and sociologists such as Ronald Cohen and Max Weber. Cohen describes ethnicity as "a sense of common descent extending beyond kinship, political solidarity vis-à-vis other groups, and common customs, language, religion, values, morality, and etiquette." See Ronald Cohen, "Ethnicity: Problem and Focus in Anthropology" *Annual Review of anthropology* 7 (1978), 379-403. See also John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, *Ethnicity*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils, K.D. Naegele, and J. Pitts (eds.), *Theories of Society: Foundations of Modern Social Theory*, (New York: Free Press, 1961), 301-9.

[7] Collins and James Burns, *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 44.

[8] Joseph Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970). For the reconstruction of the historical relationship from Greenberg's four principal linguistic families see Collins and James Burns, *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 44.

and Nilotic peoples had a common negroid ancestry with the Bantu.[9] Such interconnection will help us to see the historical relationships between the Luo and the other African societies and ultimately how the various ethnic groups are culturally interrelated. That is why some recent African scholars have argued for categories and processes of thought that are unique to Africa due to core cultural traits.[10] Moreover, mass comparison of African languages justifies a common origin as an adequate explanatory hypothesis.[11] We may reasonably expect that just as effective human action proceeds from adequate thought, so also are African cultural practices that are a product of African traditional thought.

4.1.3 Ethnographic survey of the Luo: Nomenclature

Assigning a name for the group of people that is the subject of the present study has sometimes proved to be a challenge. Our first task therefore is to interpret the word "Luo" in order to expose some possible contention or confusion surrounding its variant meanings and applications.

The "Luo" that are the subject of this study are, as Ogot, Ocholla-Ayayo, and other ethnologists clarify, the Southern Luo, the Luo of Kenya.[12] Some authorities like Butt use "Lwo" to refer exclusively to the Southern Luo. Other authorities see the Luo's migration and settlement to have contributed to the prevailing nomenclatural systems; Simon Okumba Miruka, for example, points out that "Luo" has the meaning of *luwo* (to follow)[13] which is closely related to "Luo" and "Lwo".

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[9] Marsh and Kingsnorth, *A History of East Africa*, 9.

[10] Joseph M. Nyasani, *The African Psyche* (Nairobi: University of Nairobi and Theological Printing Press Ltd, 1997),

[11] Greenberg, *Languages of Africa*, (Blomington: Mouton & Co, 1966), 2.

[12] See for example A. B. C. Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics Among the Southern Luo* (Uppsala, Sweden: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1976), 14.

[13] Simon Okumba Miruka, *Oral Literature of the Luo* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2001), 1.

Crazzolara has ingeniously pieced together the available information regarding the history of the Luo. He concludes that

> *Jii*, meaning human beings, is a collective name for the Nilotes as opposed to the Bantu and other racial groups. There are three Jii groups – the *Naadh* (Nuer), *Jiaan* (Dinka) and *Lwoo* (Shilluk, etc.)[14]

We may not expect perfectly consistent historical information regarding the various Nilotic groups since, as Butt has cautioned, "The Nilotic traditions are often contradictory, misleading, and open to many and various interpretations."[15]

4.1.4 The Luo and their contact with other societies

Unfortunately there are no studies available that specifically describe the interaction the Luo had with other societies during their migration to their present locations. The Luo in their long history of migration and settlement came across other African societies, especially the Bantu. Did they retain their cultural identity or did gradual acculturation occur in the process? What degree of cultural purity can we expect as we study the Luo cultural traditions?

To these questions we find two different answers. The first is that the Luo were flexible and easily adjusted to the cultures of those with whom they came into contact. This view further holds that in fact they borrowed much from the cultures of the people with whom they came into contact. Maxon, a typical proponent of this view, says that

> The Lwoo-speaking migrants seem to have been highly adaptable, adjusting with ease to new situations. Indeed the flexibility of the Lwoo has been a striking feature of their history. The Lwoo migrants borrowed much in the way of culture, ideas, and language from the people they encountered, and those people were in turn influenced by the Lwoo. One of the striking facts of the history. . . is that many people who came to speak a Lwoo language and to adopt the Lwoo culture

[14] Crazzolara, *Lwoo Migrations*, 10.
[15] Butt, *The Nilotes of the Sudan and Uganda*, 24.

> and ideas were peoples who originally spoke Bantu, Sudanic, or Plains Nilotic languages.[16]

The second view holds that the Luo had a cultural stance that enabled them to maintain the purity of their cultural identity in the face of cultural diversity that they encountered. In Butt's assessment of the Nilotes we find this assertion:

> All who have come into contact with the Nilotes have remarked on the proud, individualistic and truculent behavior which they display towards each other and particularly towards foreigners. They consider their country the best in the world and everyone inferior to themselves. For this reason they despise clothing, scorn European and Arab cultures, and are contemptuous and reserved with foreigners, so that it is difficult to get to know them. Their attitude towards any authority that would coerce them is one of touchiness, pride, and reckless disobedience. Each determines to go his own way as much as possible, has a hatred for submission, and is ready to defend himself and his property from the inroads of others. They are thus self-reliant, brave fighters, turbulent and aggressive, and are extremely conservative in their aversion from innovation and interference. . . . Once their suspicion has been overcome, however, they are hospitable to strangers. They admire those who, like themselves, are independent and capable of fighting for themselves and they are said to be chivalrous in their treatment of women.[17]

If Butt's assessment of the Nilotic temperament is accurate, then it is not likely that the Luo were "highly adoptable" and "flexible" as Maxom described them. A group that looked down on other cultures, despised and regarded them as inferior would not be inclined to borrow from those same cultures.

Butt's observations are supported by Crazzolara and relates how the Dinka "joined the Lwoo willingly and fought full-heartedly at their side against the hated Funj."[18] Crazzolara concludes that the extreme bitterness from that particular fighting illustrated a general principle of the Lwoo "of coming to terms with a beaten people allowing them to remain in their old

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[16] Robert M. Maxom, *East Africa: An Introductory History* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Pres, 1986), 61.

[17] Butt, *The Nilotes of the Sudan and Uganda*, 41.

[18] Crazzolara, *Lwoo Migrations*, 40.

places at the side of the conquerors and consequently assimilating them."[19] Ogot, referring to the migration of the Oruwa Dibworo clan (between 1670 and 1730), highlights a trait that represents a pattern in the manner in which Luo conquered and absorbed the other clans en route. When the clan came into contact with the Padhola clans the Oruwa clan sang:

> We people of Oruwa Dibworo we are quick to take.
> We meet a stranger, and very soon he becomes a Ja-Oruwa of Dibworo who comes along with us.
> Eee, the Omwa Walangal underestimated the strength of the Padhola.
> They had annihilated the people of Kiyeki;
> The Omwa also underestimated the size of the Oruwa clan,
> Mistaking the first arrivals for the whole clan;
> But when we all arrived we defeated them and drove them away.[20]

Ehret describes the Luo's entry into present-day Kenya, highlighting the fact that the Luo retained their cultural identity in the midst of the communities they found already occupying the regions they intended to occupy. Ehret says:

> In the later sixteenth century, a new ethnic complication, the arrival of the Luo immigrants from Pabungu, began to affect developments south of Mt. Elgon along the northeastern shores of Lake Nyanza. Additional Luo settlers from Pabungu continued to filter into the region all through the seventeenth century, gradually assimilating various communities previously Luyia in language.[21]

It does not seem likely that the Luo easily adopted the cultural practices they found in the process of their migration, as the first view suggests. The observations of the second view, on the other hand, suggest that the Luo emerged with their cultural peculiarities in contradistinction to the surrounding peoples. Although it is not theoretically tenable to convert these anecdotal pieces of evidence into testable hypotheses and conclusions, it is nevertheless reasonable to conclude that the Luo held the distinctiveness of their cultural practices. We can therefore expect a

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[19] Crazzolara, *Lwoo Migrations*, 40.
[20] Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo*, 102-3.
[21] Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa*, 396.

reasonable degree of wholeness of Luo culture: that they retained the accumulated wisdom of their cultures. The survival of their cultural spirit and the values and spirit through which it survived will be an important factor in our analysis of their ritual practices.

At the same time we must pay attention to what anthropologists have pointed out with consistency, namely that culture is not static. It is therefore fair to conclude that although the Luo struggled to keep their cultural traits intact throughout their migration and settlements, their traditions and cultures might have incorporated foreign ideas and values and might have been influenced by some of the neighboring cultures.

4.2 Religiosity of the Luo

Luo culture must be looked at side by side with Luo religion. One of the most prominent African philosophers, Kwasi Wiredu, has made a startling statement regarding the Luo. Wiredu rightly acknowledges that belief in a supreme being is common to the traditional thought of African peoples, and then proceeds to single out the Luo as an example of an African society that seems not to have any place for the supreme being in their highly sophisticated traditional thought.[22] Although Wiredu does not engage in a detailed study of the Luo, he nevertheless explains that the Luo's apparent a-theism is due to the fact that the Luo lack a conceptual understanding of the Supreme Being in their communal philosophy.[23]

Wiredu is not alone in asserting Luo atheism. When the early Europeans working among the Kenya Luo between 1902 and 1907 failed to find temples and altars dedicated to God, as explicitly revealed in Judeo-Christianity, they quickly concluded that the Luo had "little

[22] Kwasi Wiredu, "Metaphysics in Africa" in *A Companion to metaphysics*, eds. Jaegwon Kim, Ernest Sosa, and Gary S. Rosenkrantz (Malden, MA; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 415.
[23] Wiredu, *A Companion to Metaphysics*, 313.

religion."[24] Surprisingly, even missionaries who, according to Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton's study, examined Luo traditional customs from 1910 until the 1930s with a view to present them in a good light, attributed Luo sacrificial rites to "demonology" and "superstition" rather than to God.[25]

Is it true that the Luo communal philosophy was devoid of the concept of God and that even their customs and cultural practices were inherently superstitious and only tied to demons as these authors claim? A number of scholars have challenged these observations. Consequently debates have raged in scholarly circles as to the manner in which a Supreme Power exists in the traditional Luo belief system.

It would be a grievous mistake to assert or even suggest Luo atheism. A reader with any minimum knowledge about Africa readily understands what numerous scholars have often pointed out, namely the intertwining of the religion and everyday life of African peoples, an observation which is echoed succinctly in the often quoted insight by African scholars, namely that Africans are notoriously religious or religiously incurable.[26] Beyond such general assumptions one finds that early writings such as Paul Mboya's *Luo Kitgi Gi Timbegi* ("Luo customs and culture," first published in 1906) affirmed that the Luo recognized God in their traditional life.[27]

The critics of Luo religion failed to recognize the complex nature of the Luo religious system. The Luo's religiosity is to be seen against the backdrop of their experiences as

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[24] John Roscoe, *The Northern Bantu*, 291.

[25] Cynthia Heohler-Fatton, *Women of Fire and Spirit: History, Faith, and Gender in Roho Religion in Western Kenya* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996), 124.

[26] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1969), 1 also used Geoffery Parrinder, *Religion in Africa*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 235. These claims have been scrutinized by several scholars such as Jean Marc Éla, Okot p'Bitek, and V. Y. Mudimbe who have questioned the validity of the claims of pervasive religiosity of African traditional societies. See Jan Platvoet, "Is Africa Incurably Religious: Confessing and Contesting an Invention", in *Exchange*, 32, no. 2 (2003): 123-153.

[27] Paul Mboya, *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi* (Kisumu: Anyange Press Ltd., 1983), 25.

individuals and as a community. Aylward Shorter has insightfully echoed that complexity in a general observation about the African people:

> Obviously the religion of an African people is the product of innumerable, interacting elements, environmental, economic, sociological, historical, psychological, and so forth, but none of these taken singly or all together, can account for everything in the ultimate form taken by that religion. Religious experience is both the inner experience of an individual and the mutual affirmation by a community or common insights.[28]

It would therefore be erroneous to assume that the Luo do not have "God" in their philosophical and religious world view. One must keep in mind that their economic, social, and cultural concerns offer them opportunities to express their religious beliefs and faith in God. How these areas of life dovetail and become expressed depends on the circumstances in which people find themselves.

4.2.1 The Luo concept of God

The specific ways by which the Luo function in their religious world can better be examined in a broad cultural framework, a framework that recognizes them as a Nilotic sub-group. This study does not claim to do a broad study of Luo religion but from the anthropological observations made so far, we are in a position to recognize Luo theism by 1) identifying and describing clear cultural rationales guiding the Luo religious rituals and 2) analyzing relevant currents that determine the rituals of the present study.

The religious history of the Luo can be traced in the larger Southern Nilotic peoples' religious worldview which, according to John Edward Phillips, goes as far back as the first millennium B.C.E.[29] Phillips' study illustrates a case of religious borrowing and some degree of

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[28] Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology* (London: Geoffery Chapman, 1975), 96.
[29] John Edward Philips, *Writing African History* (NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 98.

interconnectedness of African societies. He says that "The proto-Southern Nilotes of about 800-500 B.C.E. took over a new set of ideas about the realm of the spirit from their southern Cushitic neighbors in central Kenya."[30]

Unlike other aspects of Nilotic culture, Nilotic religions have received considerable scholarly attention. Two prominent scholars, the distinguished British social anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Godfrey Lienhardt, both deemed it fit to treat Nilotic religion at length at the beginning of their studies and put special emphasis on Nilotes' unique theism.[31] Leinhardt's study of the Dinka ultimately led him to a central Durkheimian premise (namely that the social is to be understood as an objective fact outside of the individual) that will help us to analyze Luo rituals: that religion cannot be reduced to a single set of beliefs and practices; rather religion is constituted by complex sets of natural and social practices.[32] It follows from Leinhart's observation that if one fails to see sets of beliefs and religious practices among the Luo that are recognizable in other societies, one should rather look at the "complex sets of natural and social practices" before jumping to the conclusion of Luo atheism.

Considering the variations in the various Nilotic sub-groups in referring to their supreme being, we may conclude that each Nilotic sub-group practices religion in a manner that is specific to its unique identity, although several groups often share elements of belief and rituals because of common ancestry or mutual influence.

The Luo people have always been aware of their God. In fact when Ogot writes about the first three Luo significant groups to arrive in the western part of the land which came to be

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[30] Phillips, *Writing African History*, 98. Phillip gives an example of a key word for divinity of the Southern Cushites "asis" (which meant either sun or divinity) that the proto-Southern Nilotes acquired. Phillips, *Writing African History*, 98.

[31] See E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940) and Godfrey Leinhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

[32] Cited in T. M. S. Evens "Contradiction and Choice Among the Dinka and in Genesis" in *Anthropology as Ethics: Nondualism and the Conduct of Sacrifice* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 176-182.

known as Kenya, he discusses the *Jokajok* ('the people of God'), the *Jokowiny*, and the *Jokomolo*.[33] It is a well known fact that the Luo refer to their Supreme Being as *Nyasaye*.[34] Perhaps it is Parker Shipton who expresses this best when he says that the

> Luo have readily accepted the notion of the supreme creator; arguably it was there before any Muslims or Christians arrived. . . Many pray or invoke often in a day. What is certain, though, is that neither the ubiquitous Christianity (or –ies) nor the so far more tenuously rooted Islam has expunged other aspects of indigenous aspects of East African faith or practice from the region: not the observance of sacrifice to ancestors or their spirits, nor the common understanding that witches and witchcraft are about and active.[35]

Shipton's observation highlights one of the features of Luo religiosity that may be taken almost for granted, namely that the Luo consider their religion as a given. It is so much part of their culture that they do not see the need to engage in sophisticated theological or philosophical arguments to justify their beliefs. One way to look at the Luo pragmatic approach to Nyasaye is to observe the ways in which God is sometimes worshipped directly under certain titles such as *Nyasaye man malo* (transcendent God) and *Nyasaye mani e polo* (God who is in heaven). Professor Ogutu's systematic presentation of some common terms and models as the Luo employ them in their attempts to describe *Nyasaye* enlarges our understanding:

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[33] Bethwell Allan Ogot, *Economic adaptation and change among the Jii-speaking peoples of eastern Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Anyange Press, 1996), 80-84. (More details on the concept of *Jok* and the Luo migration and settlement follow below.)

[34] The Catholic Priest, Fr. Nicholas Stam, writing as early as 1910, observed that the Luo (Nilotic) and the Luhyia (Bantu) had "a distinct idea of God" (*Nyasaye*) although the two groups differed slightly in their rituals. Nicholas Stam, "The Religious Conceptions of the Kavirondo", *Anthropos*, Bd. 5, H. 2. (1910): 360. In a later article when he wrote about the Bantu religious conceptions he referred to the Luhyia God as *Were* or *Nasayi*, a term he claims, was borrowed from the Nilotic *sayo*, which in Luo means "to beseech", therefore *Nyasaye* is "the one whom they beseech". "Nyasaye" has close lexical construction with the Luhyia (Bantu) word *khusayo* which means "to beseech", hence *Nasayi* "the one who is beseeched". Nicholas Stam, *Anthropos*, Bd. 14/15, H. 4./6. (Jul. - Dec., 1919/1920): 972-973. See also Gilbert E. M. Ogutu, "Culture and Language in God Talk" in Robert P. Scharlemann and Gilbert E. M. Ogutu (eds.) *God in Language* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987), 91.

[35] Parker Shipton, *Mortgaging the Ancestors: Ideologies of Attachment in Africa* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 69.

Familial model	*Wuonwa* (our Father), *Wuon Kwere* (Father of the ancestors), *Wuon ji* (father of all people) and *Wuon ogendini* (Father of all races).
Charismatic model	*Ruodh ruodhi* (king of kings), *Janen* (seer), *Rahuma* (the famous one), *Hono* (the incomprehensible), *Ratego* (the powerful one), *Piny kinyal* (the unconquerable one), *Jalweny* (the great worrior).
Temperamental model	*Were* (the blameless one), *Jahera* (the loving one), *Jang'wono* (the kind one), and *Jamrima* (the one with temper).
Spatial model	*Hagawa* (all embracing one), *Nyakalaga* (the one found everywhere).
Pigmental model	*Dibo* or *Rachar* (the white one), *Rapenda* (the brown and the red one).[36]

An important point that ought to be borne in mind is what some critics such as D. A. Masolo have called a "Western misinterpretation of African ideas and concepts"[37] about God and God's manifestation in God's world. Masolo echoes what many other critics have voiced in different ways, namely "the zealous missionaries" were "intent on splitting Africans' world view" arbitrarily "into two separate, mutually independent, and unequal spheres in order to locate an abode for a new deity in one of them".[38]

A fierce critic of western culture, Okot P'Bitek, who saw himself as a pioneer of decolonization in African philosophy, also asserts that a two-tier worldview that sees a high god apart from the world is "a creation of the missionaries."[39] A way to steer clear from the dualist perspective that missionaries have been accused of is to understand the Luo perspective of how the spiritual realm works, to which I will now turn.

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[36] Ogutu, *God in Language Talk*, 93.

[37] D. A. Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing world* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 192.

[38] Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World*, 192.

[39] Cited in Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World*, 192.

4.2.2. Luo spiritual world view

The spiritual worldview of the Luo is understood through the concept of *Jok*. The concept is used "throughout the Luo languages to refer to God as a mystical force or vital powers."[40] The Southern Luo use *Jok* less frequently than the other Nilotic sub-groups, the term used more often is *Juok*.[41] The two words (*jok* or *juok*) are usually applied in a manner equivalent to Placide Tempels' idea of *vital force*.[42]

More concretely, the Southern Luo's spiritual worldview is centered on three main interlocking areas: 1) belief in God (*Nyasaye*); 2) veneration of ancestral spirits and an awareness of other spirits that inhabit the world; 3) evil especially as manifested in or caused by witchcraft and malevolent spirits.[43] These three interconnected areas are important to every Luo. Life to a Luo is precarious. Questions of life and death, of joy and sorrow, of hope and despair are always in their minds. The three interrelated areas provide the Luo with a world-view that is first and foremost dependent on God. That world view provides them with a system of values, attitudes, and beliefs, which helps them to cope and live with everyday events and occurrences.

Nyasaye is the dominant universal power. As Stam summarized: He is the

> creator or originator of all things. It is true, the Supreme Being is not adored, but, when a child is born, it is ascribed to Nyasaye; when anyone dies, it is Nyasaye that has taken him away; and when a warrior returns safe from battle, it is Nyasaye that has given him a safe return to his home.[44]

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[40] Jim Harries "The Name of God in Africa and Related Contemporary Theological, Development and Linguistic Concerns", *Exchange* 38 (2009): 281. For a detailed study see Ogot, "The Concept of Jok", in Toyin Falola and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo (eds.), *The challenges of History and Leadership in Africa :The Essays of Bethwell Allan Ogot* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002).

[41] Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics Among the Southern Luo*, 170.

[42] Ogot, "The Concept of Jok", 2. Placid Tempels is one of the first European scholars to try to interpret African religious concepts according to Western philosophical categories. The idea of "vital force" to him was a fitting notion that unified all Bantu cosmology, ethics, and rituals. For more discussion on the concept see Placid Tempels, *Bantu philosophy* trans. Colin King (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1969).

[43] See for example Butt, *The Nilotes of the Sudan and Uganda*, 115-117.

[44] Stam, "The Religious Conceptions of the Kavirondo", 360.

Stam says in effect that virtually every Luo knows and acknowledges Nyasaye. He reveals his power in the important events of human life and exercises his power in his creatures. That is why according to John Roscoe, Nyasaye "is found in large trees, and in time of trouble or sickness offerings are made to him of animals killed under a large tree."[45]

However, Nyasaye is not ordinarily approached directly because he is not directly involved in the human society or the individual lives of people. Between Nyasaye and humans is a pantheon of spirits, including ancestors, who are directly involved in the lives of human beings, and act as intermediaries between God and humans. The veneration of ancestors is therefore one of the most important aspects of the Luo spiritual worldview. Carol DuPré, who assembled important reference material on Luo culture, writes that

> The ancestors are the most vital element of Luo supernatural beliefs. They resemble the living—they are selfish, kind, happy, and sad. If disaster strikes a homestead, the ancestors can purge it, but just as often they are responsible for the disaster. The Luo believe the ancestors become troublesome if they are ignored. An important function of ancestor worship is the power it provides elders. Only elders are able to invoke the aid of ancestors. This in effect sanctions the authority of the elders of the lineages. The ancestors are also a focus of unity for the lineages since each group is united by a common ancestor.[46]

The Luo "ancestors" require more description, which I will offer below. For the time being it is important to highlight an important link between *Nyasaye* and Luo ancestors. *Jok (Nyasaye)* as a root has broad and wide contextual effects in the Luo spiritual worldview. One of its extensions is *juok* (its plural is *juogi*) which refers to ancestral spirits.[47] A direct consequence in practice is

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[45] John Roscoe, *The Nothern Bantu: an account of some central African tribes of the Uganda Protectorate* (New York: Berns & Nobles, 1966), 291.

[46] Carol DuPré, *The Luo of Kenya: An Annotated Bibliography* (Washington, DC: Institute of Cross-Cultural Research, 1968), 53.

[47] *Juok* is a general and often confusing term that is used in varying ways among the various Luo groups ranging from immaterial realities to moral behavior. Masolo's criticism of two Luo eminent scholars, Ogot and p'Bitek who have analytically examined *juok* to mean "soul" or "spirit," merits our attention. Masolo criticizes the two scholars' attempt to translate indigenous African words into words that are comprehensible to the cosmological order of the

that the Luo "offer prayers through the spirits of their forefathers and ancestors."[48] An ancestral spirit is generally considered good. There is also

> A spirit which has been forgotten by the living; the ghost of a man who died resentful or angry – or of a murdered man whose kin have not exacted revenge – any of these may become a *jacien* and cause harm to those who wronged it.[49]

Spirits move freely in the world and sometimes possess human beings. Sickness is usually attributed to the malevolent spirit or magic (of an envious person who wishes to bring misfortune).[50] If it is suspected that a spirit has possessed a man, it is left to an *ajuoga* (divine healer) who himself or herself is inspired by the spirits, to appease the possessing spirit with sacrifice and special medicines.[51] Occasionally people do not recover completely from spirit possession. In such cases it is believed that another spirit which the *ajuoga* cannot subdue is in control.[52]

With such belief in the powerful presence of the spirit(s), do the Luo implicitly recognize many gods? This question will be addressed in due time; suffice it to mention at this point that a distinction ought to be made between the Aristotelian-monarchical structure of Western philosophy that influences Christian theology and the African traditional perspective that views divinity as one and many at the same time. From this perspective I shall describe God as one who manifests himself in many forms including the forms of ancestral spirits.

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dominant Christian culture and which "had hitherto not been part of the metaphysical of psychological vocabulary in Dholuo". Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World*, 185, 212.

[48] Ocholla-Ayayo, 170.

[49] Butt, *The Nilotes of the Sudan and Uganda*, 116. The Southern Luo use *jachien*.

[50] Butt, *The Nilotes of the Sudan and Uganda*, 117.

[51] Paul Wenzel and Ruth Jane Prince, *The Land is Dying: Contingency, Creativity and Conflict in Western Kenya* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), 169. The Luo are familiar with a frightening phenomenon of collective unknown spirits known as *Nyawawa*, passing across Luo land usually from the highlands towards Lake Victoria. Nyawawa are recognized by noises made by voices of spirits, crying, clapping, and singing. The living who hear *nyawawa* respond by banging tin pots together and paying no attention to the calls of *nyawawa* lest they are taken along the *nyawawa's* rushing wind and become infected by dangerous diseases. See Geissler and Prince, *The Land is Dying*, 169.

[52] DuPré, *The Luo of Kenya*, 53.

The ancestral spirits are an important part of Luo cosmology. Consistent with this belief is the knowledge that life continues after death, that the spirit realm is accessible to humans, and that the communion between the living and their deceased family and friends is maintained beyond death.

When we consider the three concepts *juogi*, *ajuoga*, and disease together, we come to an understanding of yet another important aspect of Luo spiritual worldview: the widely maintained conception that disease or other misfortune can be caused by supernatural power. Michael Whisson, who has studied "Some Aspects of Functional Disorder Among the Kenya Luo," writes that "the complex of ideas concerning religion and magic [is] bound up with that [supernatural power] concerning the causation of disease."[53] Since the Luo "make no distinction between religion and magic and witchcraft,"[54] rituals are performed both for their cultural and religious significance. Religion (and its variants) becomes a righting mechanism for the individual's or the society's disequilibrium.

4.2.3. *Chira* as a mystical retribution

One such disequilibrium is disease. The Luo approach to disease is both complicated and intriguing. While the ancestors are loved and are counted on for blessings and prosperity, they are also feared as potential causes of diseases. Whisson writes:

> The ancestral spirits might also bring disease to their descendants. The diviner might ascribe disease to the spirit's anger at the patient's breaking of a taboo or neglecting a ritual or merely to their desire for attention in the form of sacrifice. Any condition caused by ritual impurity [is] called *chira*.[55]

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[53] Michael Whisson, "Some Aspects of Functional Disorder Among the Kenya Luo" in Ari Kiev (ed.), *Magic, Faith, and Healing: Studies in Primitive Psychiatry Today* (New York: Free Press, 1974, 1964), 285.
[54] DuPré, *The Luo of Kenya*, 54.
[55] Whisson, "Some Aspects of Functional Disorder Among the Luo", 286.

Whisson brings us to a phenomenon that receives a lot of attention among the Luo: the dreaded *chira*.[56] *Chira* is never spoken of straightforwardly, and never defined easily either. In the absence of a concise and succinct definition of *chira*, I submit that it is an illness characterized by wasting away that arises from a victim's (or a victim's kin's) omission or commission of a known relationship taboo.[57] Moreover, I see similarities between *chira* and George Murdock's notion of *mystical retribution*: "acts in violation of some taboo or moral injunction when conceived as causing illness directly rather than through the mediation of some offended or punitive supernatural being."[58] From these considerations, and although no other author applies this to the Luo, I find it appropriate to refer to *chira* as a *mystical retribution*.

Many authors have paid attention to *chira* because of its centrality in defining Luo morality, the societal ordering of values, and the preservation and reproduction of lineage. In his clear description of *chira*, Ocholla-Ayayo says writes that

> *Chira* will underline all moral acts, the consequences of which may inflict misfortune, suffering and punishment upon the individual and his family. The breaking of their law may cause death to the children, may prevent a family from

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[56] *Chira* and its manifestation are not entirely unique to the Luo. Some communities in Japan for example believe that certain diseases, injuries, and misfortunes can be caused by supernatural power. See Teigo Yoshida, "Mystical Retribution, Spirit Possession, and Social Structure in a Japanese Village", *Ethnology* 6, no. 3 (Jul., 1967): 237-262. As expressed in one of the classics of African anthropology, Audrey Richards's observation seems to have reflected a widespread practice of a number of societies of her day when she wrote:

> We know that primitive peoples are alike in their almost universal belief that death and disasters are due to supernatural agencies. They differ, on the other hand, greatly as to the proportion of human ills which they attribute to hostile fellow beings with supernatural powers and which they believe to be inflicted by supernatural beings, angry spirits and the like.

See Audrey Isabel Richards, "A Modern Movement of Witch-Finders" in M. Marwick, *Witchcraft and Sorcery* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970 [1935]), 170.

[57] There are numerous examples that view *chira* as the breaking of a known relationship taboo: for example Parkin refers to it as a result of "confusion of relationship boundaries." See David Parkin, *The Cultural Definition of Political Response: Lineal Destiny Among The Luo of Kenya* (London and New York: Academic Press, 1978), 149. Ogutu also spells out some *chira* inducing cases, examples that supports my definition: "sleeping in the same house with a mother-in-law; assuming seniority where it is not due; a widow who has not gone through widow cleansing or leviratic union; [a woman] visiting her children in their houses." Ogutu, *Ker Jaramogi is Dead*, 13. For more treatment of the subject see especially Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics Among the Southern Luo*, 146-150; Geissler and Prince, *The Land is Dying*, 207-8.

[58] George Peter Murdock, *Theories of illness: A world survey* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), 18.

> giving birth to children or may prevent a family from producing one sex; female or male children.[59]

Again turning to Whisson's description, he writes:

> If a child was born feet first, deformed, or albino he was *chira*—caused by ritual impurity. If a man lost weight rapidly and became too weak to move, his condition might be ascribed to his failure to bury a relation properly, thus bringing about *chira*.[60]

Chira as a mystical retribution has a profound influence on the Luos' understanding of their individual and communal identity, cultural roots, value systems, and lineage bonds. Such facts lead us to ask: how did the Luo welcome Christianity? Did these complex ideas about God, cultural practices and linguistic traditions, legacy of institutions and concepts of life, help or not help them to receive God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ? Let us look for some responses.

4.3. The Luo appropriation of Christian faith

Tension and tolerance have characterized the arrival and the continued survival of Christianity in the Luo country to the present day. Christianity first reached the Luo people on a platform of competition between the Mill Hill Missionaries, who had arrived in Luo country through Uganda in 1894, and the Church Missionary Society, who had been expanding their mission from Tanganyika from 1878.[61]

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[59] Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics Among the Southern Luo*, 146.

[60] Whisson, "Some Aspects of Functional Disorder Among the Luo", 286.

[61] The Society of the White Fathers had been commissioned by Pope Leo XIII and began their work in Tanganyika in 1878. They extended their mission to the Luo country through their mission in Tabora, along the shores of Lake Victoria. See Marie-France Perrin Jassy, tr. Jeanne Marie Lyons, *Basic Community in the African Churches* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), 30. For more details on the Mill Hill Missionaries work in Western Kenya, see Matthew Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah: The Legio Maria Church in an African Christian Landscape," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, no. 1 (2009): 22.

By the 1950's the religious climate in the western Kenya had become highly fragmented with many religious missions competing for converts. Matthew Kustenbauder writes that in the mid 1950's western Kenya was home to Catholics, Anglicans, Quakers, Seventh-day Adventists, Southern Baptists, the Salvation Army, the Africa Inland Mission, Church of God and Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada.[62] How could this vast array of Christian denominations that made their way into the Luo country possibly fail to capture the religious attention of the Luo? In fact, in such a pluralistic climate, one might argue that these competing missions seeking to articulate their Christian beliefs and practices to the Luo failed to pay sufficient attention to the Luo practices and beliefs. Moreover, the existence of these religious missions might have presented the Luo with the challenge of religious relativism, a philosophical and religious pluralism in which the Luo began to see very early on that no one cultural or religious tradition can claim to know the fullness of spiritual truth, hence the validity of all paths that lead to God.

There were two major attitudes with which the missionaries were received in the Luo country. The first was one of acceptance and that was intertwined with the tradition of Luo ancestors. Long before the missionaries arrived in the Luo country, Luo traditional specialists in the various spiritual fields who also double as magicians and prophets (*jobilo*) foretold that unique visitors would arrive in the Luo country. The Luo community was expected to be warm and hospitable to the visitors, as any resistance or lack of hospitality to the visitors would incur the wrath of the ancestors.[63]

The second was one of rejection. There were individuals and groups who rejected Christianity. The cult of Mumbo and its adherents are a good example. Around the year 1914 a

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[62] Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 22.

[63] Bethwell A. Ogot, "British Administration in the Central Nyanza District of Kenya, 1900–60," *Journal of African History* 4, no. 2 (1963): 249.

belief emerged about a giant mythical water snake called Mumbo, which was claimed to have its origins in the waters of Lake Victoria in south-western Kenya.[64] Mumbo, through Onyango Dunde, condemned Christianity as "rotten" and vowed to cleanse the land of "white people," the colonial officials and their African agents together with the missionaries, and their converts.[65] Mumbo speaking through Dunde is believed to have said that

> Those whom I choose personally, and also those who acknowledge me, will live forever in plenty. Their crops will grow of themselves and there will be no more need to work. I will cause cattle to come up out of the lake in great numbers to those who believe in me ... All Europeans are your enemies, but the time is shortly coming when they will all disappear from our country ... Lastly, my followers must immediately slaughter all their cattle, sheep and goats. When this is done, I will provide them with as many as they want from the lake.[66]

Mumbo was outlawed and suppressed in 1934 and ultimately eradicated in 1954 by the colonial administration.[67] Mumboism exerted some negative influence in both the Luo community and the relationship between the Luo and Christianity.

In light of these two attitudes with which Christianity was received by the Luo, we wonder: what kind of Christianity was presented to the Luo? In which form was Christianity presented to them? Did or did not Christianity succeed in striking deep roots in the soul of the Luo? Perhaps a general response to these questions emerges from the critics who have often observed that a predominantly African animistic worldview held sway over the minds of

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[64] DuPré, *The Luo of Kenya*, 56. When a man named Dunde claimed that he had been swallowed and regurgitated by Mumbo, a cult arose and spread among the Luo people, the only cult in the Luo country, according to DuPré. Dunde claimed that he was instructed to spread Mumbo gospel. According to this gospel, believers would be rewarded with good health and fortune while non-believers would face death. See DuPré, *The Luo f Kenya*, 56. See also Brett L. Shadle, "Patronage, Millennialism and the Serpent God Mumbo in South-West Kenya, 1912-34" in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 72, no. 1 (2002).

[65] Shadle, "Patronage, Millennialism and the Serpent God Mumbo in South-West Kenya, 1912-34," 29.

[66] Shadle, "Patronage, Millennialism and the Serpent God Mumbo in South-West Kenya, 1912-34," 31.

[67] Shadle, "Patronage, Millennialism and the Serpent God Mumbo in South-West Kenya, 1912-34," 35.

Africans so that even the best of the converts to Christianity were often nominal Christians.[68] As we shall see below, such Christians identify themselves as Christians and at the same time still hold on to some of their cherished African traditional beliefs.

4.3.1. Acceptance of Christianity and rejection of Luo way of life

Marie-France Perrin Jassy, writing on the initial interaction between the Luo and the missionaries, makes a point expressed by other scholars in various ways. Jassy says that the missionary churches presented their message as a complete renewal of a way of life that could not co-exist with an existing Luo way of life.[69] The Kenyan artist and author, James Ngugi, articulated well what many perceived to be the consequence of becoming a Christian in Kenya (and for the Luo) when he wrote:

> Thus accepting Christian Church meant the outright rejection of all the African customs. It meant the rejection of those values and rituals that held us together: it meant adopting what in effect was a de-based European middle-class mode of living and behavior. The European missionary had attacked the primitive rites of our people, had condemned our African dances, the images of our god, recoiling from their suggestion of satanic sensuality. The early African convert did the same often with greater zeal, for he had to prove how Christian he was through this rejection of his past and roots.[70]

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[68] For example, the Kenya Anglican Bishop who has often preached fiercely about the superficiality of the Church in Kenya asserts that many Africans have slipped into being merely nominal Christians, having replaced true faith with outward religious traditions. According to Njoya, true faith has been replaced by "libations, doctrines, sacrifices, customs, and rituals." Cited in Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998/2002), 183-4. From western Africa, Teresa Okure observes that

> Christianity is almost synonymous with attending Mass, especially on Sundays, saying the Rosary, going to the sacraments and doing one's Easter duty. Christianity thus emerges as a set of external and imported practices to be performed rather than as a way of life to be adopted and lived (Cf. Rom. 6: 1-23. Acts 9:2). This conception of Christianity also militates against seeing our Christian faith as being essentially commitment to a person, Jesus of Nazareth (Cf. Jn. 6:29). Yet as Ignatius of Antioch noted long ago, Jesus himself is the Good News whom we must receive, live and proclaim.

Cited in Pius Oyeniran Abioje, "Path to African Christian Theology of Inculturation," in *Journal of Arabic and Religious Studies* 15, (December 2001): 1.

[69] Jassy, *Basic community in The African Churches*, 30.

[70] James Ngugi, "The Church: A Pawn of Capitalism?" in *Présence* 4, no. 3 (1971): 54.

Ngugi further claims that Christianity alienated its new converts from their "ancestral shrines and roots."[71] Peter Dirven, the Dutch American Mill Hill priest who studied the Legio Church for his doctorate in the early seventies, also claims that "Western Christianity was superimposed — and apparently eagerly accepted — or rather juxtaposed without coming to grips with the traditional aspirations."[72]

Although these authors raise important questions, they seem to imply that Christianity was imposed on passive and subordinate African peoples. These assertions exemplify a genre of scholarship that emphasizes a mode of conversion to Christianity that is not entirely accurate, looked upon from the backdrop of the Luo people. As has been expressed in other studies which I will describe below, with an example of an indigenous church, in the Luo conversion there was a process of cultural integration and selective appropriation by the host religion.[73] Christianity was not merely an instrument of oppression that was imposed on the Luo to lull the Luo and turn them away from the material reality of this world, as Ngugi has suggested elsewhere.[74]

4.3.2. Legio Maria Church as a protest and challenge to Christianity

In order to see the dynamics of cultural integration, and selective appropriation within the Luo community, it is important to pay attention to the manner in which the Luo people responded to the missionary initiatives in their country. The interplay of religious ideas and the matrices

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[71] Ngugi, "The Church: A Pawn of Capitalism?," 54.

[72] Peter Dirven, "A Protest and a Challenge: The Maria Legio Breakway Church in West Kenya," *African Ecclesial Review* 12, no. 2 (1970).

[73] Kate Lowe, "Black Africans' Religious and Cultural Assimilation to, or Appropriation of, Catholicism in Italy, 1470-1520" in *Renaissance et Réform* 31, no. 2 (2008): 67.

[74] James A. Ogude, "Ngugi's Concept of History and the Post-Colonial Discourses in Kenya" in *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, 31, no. 1 (1997): 104.

within which the Luo people welcomed Christianity is best analyzed in the phenomenon of the Legio Maria Church, which broke off from the Roman Catholic Church.[75]

Legio Maria (hereafter "Legio") was the largest church group that broke off from the Roman Catholic Church.[76] A systematic and detailed treatment of the Legio Church has been made by many scholars; I offer a brief background. Legio was started by a former auxiliary Catholic catechist, Simeon Ondeto, and another Catholic woman, Gaudencia Aoko, in 1963. The two appealed to the Luo mainly through their powerful preaching.[77]

Ondeto and Aoko were among Christians who, we surmise, (1) felt ostracized within their own churches most often due to polygamy; (2) were considered as irregularly married and therefore denied full participation in the Church; (3) felt neglected as there were many parishioners and few priests available; (4) accused some Catholic priests of simony, priests who at times dispensed spiritual healing power in return for payment.[78]

The worldwide movement of the Legion of Mary, which was brought to Kenya in the 1930s by Edel Mary Quinn, a missionary from Ireland, provided a rich spiritual background for Legio. The Legion of Mary, because of its hierarchical order and emphasis on sanctity of its members through prayer and works of charity, appealed to the Luo traditional piety, hence the name "Legio Maria." The Legion of Mary's entry into the Luo country coincided with the

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[75] Several studies provide a systematic and helpful background resources for Legio Maria including Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah"; Peter Dirven, "The Maria Legio: The Dynamics of a Breakaway Church Among the Luo in East Africa," Dissertation in Missiology, Pontificia Universitatis Gregoriana, Rome, 1970; Nancy Schwartz, "Christianity and the Construction of Global History: The Example of Legio Maria," in *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*, ed. Karla Poewe (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994). Other groups that broke away from established churches include the "Nomiya Luo Mission," "Dini ya Roho," "African Israel Church Nineveh," the "Church of Christ in Africa," the "Pentecostal Assemblies," "Warruok" (Voice of World Wide Salvation and Healing Revival), and "Fweny Mar Lam" (Seventh Day Adventists). Jassy, *Basic Community in the African Churches*, 79-89.

[76] The membership of Legio was estimated to be 20,000 in the early 60s. By 1990s the number was estimated to be two million. See Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 12.

[77] Dirven, "Protest and Challenge," 129.

[78] Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 21-22.

worldwide wave of Marian devotion of the 1940s that culminated with the pronouncement of the dogma of the assumption of Mary in 1950. These Marian developments stirred the faith of many Luos and invigorated their desire for greater veneration of Mary.

Moreover, the early 1960s was the time when Kenyans were generally asserting their self-reliance on the political scene in a bid to end British dominance, overthrow Western theological hegemony, and embark on a quest to preserve Luo indigenous traditions. The Luo therefore sought autonomy not only in the political sphere but also in the religious sphere as well.[79] An observation that is not raised by any of the existing studies is that perhaps Legion of Mary furnished the Luo, in a measure, with a deity that was in line with the Luo spiritual world view of ancestors and heroes. The Luo could relate intensely with Mary the Mother of Jesus, a human face of God that was closer to their spiritual genius.

The Legio made conscious efforts to retain much of the material elements of the Roman Catholic Church's beliefs and worship practices, as well as the Catholic Church's liturgies, and the use of Latin in the Mass. The hierarchy in the Legio took the same structure as in the Catholic Church: a pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, deacons, as well as nuns.[80]

Today the Legio is still popular, although it has considerably lost its original momentum and dynamism. Some observers claim that it has perhaps become stagnant and isolated with an approximated membership of one million.[81] Dirven contends that the Legio demonstrates how

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[79] Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 21-22. Other reasons that fueled tensions and eventual break between Legio members and the Roman Catholic Church have been discerned. Marie-France believes the Luo wanted "a way of life rather than an institution," as well as their ambivalence of love and hate attitudes towards Western culture and Christianity in particular. Kustenbauder discerns three reasons: (1) the need to appropriate Christianity, defend, and define it vis-à-vis Roman Catholicism; (2) the need to appropriate apocalyptic ideas found in Christian scriptures and their synthesis with local religious traditions; and (3) the need to imitate Jesus' example and teaching to confront political and religious persecution in a manner marked by openness, universalism and nonviolence. Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 11.

[80] Dirven, "A Protest and a Challenge," 130.

[81] Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 12.

the Luo assimilated the basic tenets of Catholicism. According to Dirven the Luo protested against the particular Christianity that was presented to them and in that way presented a challenge to the Catholic Church.[82]

Christianity seemingly appealed to the Luo on its arrival to the Luo country and many Luo readily flocked into the Church enthusiastically.[83] However, as time went by the Luo became increasingly dissatisfied "with the individualistic effects of its work and the failure to build Christian communities."[84] Together with the other areas of tensions and dissatisfaction already described above, we can deduce that the Luo religious sentiment was naturally attuned to an experience of communion which was lacking in the new faith. While the Mill Hill missionaries labored especially in the initial period of Christianity's contact with the Luo to lay doctrinal foundations of Christianity, some of the Luo felt the weight of Christianity's excessively theoretical propensity and concluded that Christianity was "elitist, foreign, and formal, existing in parallel with Luo society and not meeting its felt needs."[85]

Furthermore, certain ingrained notions in the Luo psyche were never touched sufficiently by Christianity, including the Luo belief in "the reality of the spirit world, the fear of witchcraft, the concept of sickness and healing in a religious context, the emotional and even ecstatic behavior as a sign of communion with the divine."[86] Ultimately it became apparent that the Luo traditional concepts and patterns remained strong in spite of external allegiance to Christianity.

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[82] Peter Dirven, "A Protest and a Challenge."
[83] Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 21.
[84] H. W. Turner, "Reviews" in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 6, no. 1 (1974): 77.
[85] Turner, "Reviews," 78.
[86] Peter Dirven, "A Protest and a Challenge," 128-9.

4.3.3. Legio Maria as a protagonist in the struggle for Luo religious autonomy

What can we make of the Legio Maria Church? What of its similarities with the Roman Catholic Church? Studies on the separatist church suggest that Legio Maria may be considered as a protagonist in the struggle for the Luo religious autonomy from the Roman Catholic Church.

Two responses which also illustrate the Luo appropriation of the Catholic Church may be analyzed, beginning with the second question above. First, the Catholic images and structures found in the Legio are not simply facile mimicry of Catholic religious practices. Rather, they may be considered as modest attempts to establish a "contextualized and authentically homegrown version of Catholicism" within an African cultural set up.[87] Considering the consistency and faithfulness to their established practices, one must conclude that Legio showed a paradoxical hybridity that reflected the Luo's adaptive use of Christian forms and ideas to reframe Christian faith within their own cultural genius. The words of Aoko from a 1964 interview express this well:

> We believe we can pray to God even though we are Africans. We get the key to heaven from Jesus not from Rome. [. . .] Foreign missionaries just cannot understand the heart of the African people. All power for good we get from God. [. . .] [We] see no reason why foreign priests and others should attempt to interfere with what we are doing.[88]

Aoko's insights bring an important and pertinent question to the fore: how do we define the shape, doctrinal temperament and tenor of "Catholic" churches initiated and sustained by Africans without any direct theological or material sponsorship from the "mainline" Catholic Church? Considering the tremendous growth of African Initiated Churches (AICs) that continue

[87] Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 11.
[88] Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 22.

to thrive in the midst of African cultural practices and religious concerns, the Legio is instrumental in pointing at possible directions that the Catholic Church could take to assert its relevance to the Luo. John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu have articulated the aspirations of many Africans and add an important perspective to the Catholic structures and images to be found in the Legio:

> Africans have not only received the artifacts of the North Atlantic but also have reconstructed them. Thus Africans have understood the Church according to the paradigm of the traditional family, wanting to stress the sense of belonging and of community. This quest of Africans, deeply rooted in their self-understanding of reality and being, has led many to walk out of the so-called historic Churches, where they have found no satisfaction in the very individualistic understanding of the Christian faith and church.[89]

Following Pobee and Ositelu's train of thought, we can first surmise that the Legio understood the Church according to the Luo paradigm, emphasizing certain spiritual traits such as healing rituals, exorcism, deliverance from witchcraft, prophecies, glossolalia, dream interpretation, visions, and spirit possession.[90]

Second, Wipper's survey, conducted during her fieldwork in 1964 and 1965, shows that many Luos left the Catholic Church primarily because the Legio cured them of *juogi* (spirits).[91] Furthermore, the Legio had demonstrated that Luo's religio-cultural basis is very similar to the Israelites': for example, Legio Church headquarters and some of the most important developments and events of the Church are based at Kalafari (Calvary); Ondeto is buried at Got Kwer (mount of ancestors) in Kalfari where Luo diviners had once consulted ancestral spirits.[92]

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[89] John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu, *African Initiatives in Christianity: The Growth, Gifts and Adversities of Indigenous African Churches – A Challenge to The Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 26.

[90] Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 12.

[91] Audrey Wipper, "Legio Maria," photocopied manuscript, 1966, 2, Special Collections, Divinity Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. Cited in Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 33.

[92] Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 32-33.

These biblical sites carry powerful associations with Luo traditional spirituality inasmuch as the Luo, many authors have suggested, approach God in many ways similar to that of the Israelites.[93]

In the following pages, I shall point out how the Legio may be considered as a model of the Luo appropriation of the Roman Catholic Church and could serve as a benchmark for how the Luo can supply what they consider to be lacking or handle what is useless for their faith. Especially in regard to ancestors and rituals that are related to that institution, it will be important for me to show how the Catholic Church can be more pastorally sensitive and doctrinally relevant to the Luo cultural and religious particularities.

4.4 Conclusion

In this part, I have examined some available materials in an attempt to construct a descriptive analysis of the identity of the Nilotes and their Bantu neighbors. This was a crucial exercise because the Luo, the Nilotic group that is the center of this study, has a history of migration and settlement that intertwined with their neighboring communities, especially the Bantu.

Furthermore, a descriptive analysis of the Nilotes and the Bantu provided a theoretical basis for relevant theological conclusions beyond the Luo community, applicable to other African communities.

I have ended the section with a concise description of the religiosity of the Luo, their concept of God, their spiritual worldview, and their appropriation of Christianity. In the next section I will examine the Luo rituals regarding death. I will show the dynamics of the

[93] Temba L. J. Mafico, "The Biblical God of the Fathers and the African Ancestors" in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*, eds. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden, Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2001), 484.

integration of the spiritual and the material aspects of Luo culture and how such integration influences the religious meaning that provides the Luo with an intelligible unifying structure of meaning.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 LUO FUNERAL RITUALS

Introduction

For this part of the dissertation, I studied Luo funeral rites in the counties of Siaya and Kisumu in Kenya. This part consists of a blend of historical materials,[1] the use of interviews, and my observation of public behavior at the Luo funerary rituals. The historical method enabled me to consider the Luo funeral rituals in relation to the origins and migrations, cultural theories and assumptions, personalities, and crises within the Luo community. The application of qualitative research through interviews was aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of how the Luo people conceive of their present life and that experienced by the deceased members of the society. I observed the funeral rituals and conducted interviews in the mentioned counties in order to elicit information regarding the *why* and *how* of the rituals.

For reliable historical data I adopted a stratified sampling method involving a cross-section of Luo men and women of varied ages from the same target population. This historical approach enabled me to examine how the Luo see their link with their deceased members of the society. This link will be important in the subsequent development of this work because it will offer me a platform on which to examine the workings of Luo spirituality, which will consequently lead to an inquiry of their theological assumptions.

[1] Some notable materials on Luo funeral rituals include Carole DuPré, *The Luo of Kenya: An Annotated Bibliography* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Cross-Cultural Research, 1968); H. Hartmann, "Some Customs of the Luwo (Or Nilotic Kavirondo) Living in South Kavirondo", *Anthropos* 23, H. 1./2, (1928): 263-275; Jude Julius Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death: A Study of Beliefs and Ceremonies of Death in the Light of Christian Message* (Rome: Typis Pontificia Universitas Urbaninana, 1979); Richard Kisiara, "Some Sociopolitical Aspects of Luo Funerals" in *Anthropos* 93 (1998); and Wakana Shiino, "Death and Rituals Among the Luo in South Nyanza" *African Study Monographs* 18 no. 3, 4, (December, 1997): 213-228. As will be evident in this section, I have used multiple data sources and methods of data collection for more validity and trustworthiness of my findings.

Although I have depended on the ethnographic data that I obtained for the purpose of this study to generate understanding of Luo funeral rituals, I also bring an *emic* perspective to this study.[2] As a native of Luo culture I am able to observe the mundane practices and ritual acts of Luo daily life and make cultural distinctions that are meaningful to the Luo. This advantage also enables me to perceive the Luo's total cultural patterns and philosophical presuppositions. Furthermore, my use of Dholuo language gives me the advantage of making the intricate phonological distinctions that are meaningful to the Luo speakers and that only "an insider" can make.

5.1 Ethnographic descriptions of Luo funeral rituals

The overall purpose of this sub-section is to develop an ethnographic description of the Luo funeral rituals. These rituals have been changing, especially since the arrival of Western cultures and Christianity. Moreover, changes in social stratification due to migration and shrinking resources usually dictate the forms which funerals generally take.

In order to critically examine and describe the Luo funeral rituals carefully and systematically, I formulated some questions that guided the research process. The questions were semi-structured and open-ended to allow for descriptive responses. Examples of the lead questions that served as starting points of my interviews included the following:

1. Will you take me through the various stages of a typical Luo funeral?
2. Why is it important to perform the funeral rites?

[2] The neologisms *emic* and *etic* were coined from the terms 'phonemic' and 'phonetic' (in the study of language sound systems) by the American linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike. Pike suggested these terminologies as paradigms for the study of a society's cultural system. For more details see Kenneth Lee Pike, ed., *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Structure of Human Behavior* (2nd ed.), (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1967) and James Lett, "Emics and Etics: Notes on the Epistemology of Anthropology," in *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*, ed. Thomas Headland, Kenneth Pike, and Marvin Harris (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1990), 127-142.

3. Are funeral rites for men, women and children performed in the same way?
4. Do the rituals offer the living satisfactory ways of dealing with grief?
5. What is the fate of the deceased?
6. Did you participate in a funeral ceremony recently?

5.2 Some preliminary observations about Luo funeral rituals

During my two months of collecting and preparing data for the present study, I came across nine funerals and interviewed twenty-four respondents. Using these, together with my observations, I was able to determine how the Luo people perform their funeral rites.

At the outset, two important observations must be borne in mind. First, all the funeral rituals, although known by the Luo people, are not always performed every time a Luo person dies. The performance of the rituals varies according to the deceased's gender, age, and status in the society. Rituals performed for adult members of the society are generally more elaborate as compared to those performed for children. Furthermore, rituals performed for men differ from those performed for women; women's funeral rituals are generally fewer than men's rituals. Differences are also observable even for people in the same categories, such as parents. A loved parent, for example, is buried with full ceremony; siblings go a long way to spend lavishly beyond their ordinary means, even if it means borrowing from friends and neighbors or incurring debts, to give a decent send-off to a loved parent. On the other hand, a parent who left unhappy siblings behind is buried with only the bare minimum of ceremony. This practice is found in other African cultures as well. George Thomas Basden, who claimed familiarity with the Ibos of Nigeria, wrote that

> The Ibo will endure everything demanded of him in this life; will put up with hardships, the misbehavior of his children, indeed anything in order to insure that his burial will be properly performed. His whole future welfare depends upon this, and hence it takes, at all times, a most prominent place in a man's calculations.[3]

There is what the Luo may call "good" and "bad" death. There are no clearly articulated codes for what constitutes a good death but my respondents agreed that a man or woman dies a good death at a ripe old age, surrounded by relatives and friends, and without physical struggle, bitterness, or emotional anguish. On the other hand recurrent themes pertaining to qualities of a bad death include lepers and others who die of noxious diseases; strangers and people dying far away from their homes; lunatics; and people who drown in lakes and rivers, or those struck by lighting. These are buried without attendant rites or elaborate ceremonies. The emotions expressed at a funeral for a child differ greatly from those expressed for a village chief or other prominent members of the society.

Describing all the different Luo burial practices for all categories of people would be too big a task for this study. Therefore for the sake of uniformity, consistency, and narrative flow, I will describe the funeral of an adult male as my point of reference. This will give me the advantage of offering a complete outlook of Luo rituals because all Luo rituals that can be performed are performed for an adult male while the rituals may be reduced in number for other groups of people.

The second observation is related to the first: none of the funerals I observed had all the rituals to be expected of a typical Luo funeral. I will therefore first describe all the possible rituals and offer some explanation for the observable variations later on. The following are the most typical funeral rituals from the moment a Luo dies.

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[3] George Thomas Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria: An Account of the Curious & Interesting Habits, Customs & Belief of a Little Known African People by One Who Has For Many Years Lived Amongst Them on Close & Intimate Terms* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1921, 1966), 117.

5.3 The Luo Funeral Rituals

5.3.1 Announcing death (*Muocho/Golo Ywak*)

A dying person is usually surrounded by members of his lineage and friends. These usually sit, kneel, or stand near the hide or mat (bed) of the dying person, expressing their sorrow at the pending reality of death. As soon as it is established that a person is dead, the women's sobs get louder. The official announcement is usually made by a senior woman's high-pitched and long quivering wail which scholars generally refer to as "ululation."[4] The wail is usually heard in the morning or in the evening. Wailing at other times may suggest a "bad death" occurred. The wailing is sometimes followed by the sound of drums and horns. Other mourners begin rushing to the home of the deceased, weeping, wailing, and howling.

Although neither Ongong'a nor Wakana Shiino offer explanation for this first ritual, my informants were conscious about its significance. An informant said:

> *"Ywak mokowongo no lich, kendo nyaka winje maber. En en ema onyiso ni oganda duto odonjo e lit kendo gisechako gima lich. Oyawo thuolo ma kende kendo oketo oganda ekuyo to kod kowo jalo mondindono*." (That first cry is absolutely important and must be heard abundantly clearly. It signifies that the community has commenced an important sorrowful undertaking by opening a special space for mourning and sending off the deceased).

Several other informants expressed similar views regarding the significance of ritual announcement of death. The cry serves the purpose of informing a network of close relatives and neighbors of the deceased. The word of death will eventually reach the rest of the villages. At three of the funerals I attended, the relatives of the deceased were wealthy enough to request that a public announcement of the death be made on the public radios and a national daily newspaper giving details regarding the place of the funeral and burial arrangements.

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[4] See for example Joel Corneal Kuipers, "Ululations from the Weyewa Highlands (Sumba): Simultaneity, Audience Response, and Models of Cooperation" *Ethnomusicology* 43, no 3 (Fall 1999): 490-507.

What these informants pointed out is a broad and important component of ritual process. An official announcement of death envelopes the funeral participants and creates a sacred space in which the grief of the entire community can emerge and other rituals can be performed within a specific context of sorrow and hope. The ritual space that is created allows community members to ritualize their grief by wailing, dancing, uttering war cries, and whatever else is permissible in response to death. The rituals that are performed help the community to cope with grief and maintain its balance. The British ethnologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's words expresses it clearly: "a partial destruction of social cohesion" has been broken and the society can "organize itself anew and reach a new condition of equilibrium."[5]

5.3.2 Mourning (*Ywak*)

The shock of loss of a member of the community sets into motion a wave of spontaneous sorrow. Friends and family come pouring into the home of the deceased. The body of the deceased remains lying on the mat or bed where death occurred. The deceased is surrounded by family and friends.[6] The corpse is never left alone by itself from the time of death until the burial.

The rite of the announcement of death has called the attention of the community to the demise of one of its members. The community now pours into the homestead in groups and as individuals without any particular order. Mourners arrive on foot or by other means of transportation. They begin crying loudly as soon as they arrive at the gate. The home becomes filled with wailing, shouts, and cries of mourners.

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[5] Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1952), 169.

[6] Ongong'a has highlighted the significance the Luo attach to dying in the midst of family and friends. The relatives and friends, for example, "close the eyes of the man, fold the fingers, hold his legs together, especially for females and finally turn him on his back." Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death*, 35.

Ongong'a rightly points out (and I will return to it later) that tears shed for the deceased are important religious acts.[7] The society demonstrates by its actions that something has occurred, as described succinctly by the renowned British anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski:

> [Death] shakes the moral foundations of society. . . and threatens the very cohesion and solidarity of the group, and upon this depends the organization of that society. The ceremonial of death rites therefore provides the most powerful means of reintegration of the group's shaken solidarity and the re-establishment of its morale.[8]

The entire funeral is characterized by a dramatization of the excruciatingly painful fact of death and the sad feelings that emerge.

To my research question "Is there a standard way of mourning?" my respondents pointed out three distinct indispensable components of mourning that give a uniform structure to ritual mourning. These three components are the unwritten rules that govern the rituals of every mourner. The first component consists of individuals: men and women. The closeness of one's relation to the deceased determines the manner of mourning.

Women are expected to perform *uūwi* cry as they enter into the home of the deceased. *Uūwi* cry is a high-pitched long wavering cry that is accompanied by a rapid movement of the tongue and the palatine uvula. Shiino describing this cry writes that "married women raise a strange voice before entering the compound to announce their arrival."[9] Clearly, he does not understand Luo female ritual mourning practices. That explains why that which is perfectly acceptable to the Luo is "strange" to him. Shiino is an example of authors who operate outside of

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[7] Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death*, 36.

[8] Bronisław Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion: and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), 52-53.

[9] Shiino, *Death and Rituals Among the Luo in South Nyanza*, 215.

Luo cultural and lingual contexts and yet are quick to make disparaging and negative remarks that ascribe pejorative meaning to the Luo traditional customs. The negative glibness with which Western scholars (in particular) and other observers have conceptualized Luo cultural heritage may very easily become convenient ways of cultural domination and ideological subordination of the Luo.[10] In this regard, there is need for a comprehensive re-appropriation of Luo culture that accurately presents the Luo cultural practices and social values.

Women individually weep and wail for the deceased. They break into convulsed sobs. They extend one or both hands over their heads as a sign of utter helplessness and pain. They lament. Their mournful wailing often changes to responsive shouts in diverse ways, such as by asking the deceased if they have really left, why they had to leave, and if ever they will meet again. The immediate family members and other present kin are usually considered as the chief mourners. Moreover, among the chief mourners there are those who are most painfully aggrieved. For example, a mother who loses a son is generally expected to be more distraught than other mourners. Ongong'a gives an example of a mother lamenting near her son's corpse:

> *Onyango nyakwar ma* [Onyango grandson of my mother] what is wrong? Why are you running away from your group? You are going! Going leaving us behind? Could you not wait and carry your children on your arms? To play with them as your father and I played with you? You are going, leaving my hut in this condition? Who is going to cut some grass to thatch it? Will it rain on me as if I did not have a son? *Aa, aa! Nyakwar ma, itimona kamano nang'o? Ikelo nyiero kuoma nang'o?* (Ah! Ah! Grandchild of my mother, why do you do that to me? Why do you bring laughter on me? What did I do to deserve this?)[11]

At this point it is important to open a parenthesis and point out that the Luo's use of lamentations by words is not completely peculiar to them. Ongong'a's example above can be found in many

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[10] The literature that illustrates this point is numerous. Richard Maynard for example writes that Western media "are empowered to paint an image of Africa by listing its deficiencies with respect to Western norms" Richard Maynard, *Africa on Film: Myth and Reality* (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Books, 1974), 4.

[11] Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death*, 39.

cultures within and even outside of Africa. In Greek culture, for example, it is common to hear mourners address the dead as if they are still alive, even many years after they died. A mother weighed down by pain and grief at her daughter's exhumation after five years for the daughter's second burial (which involves digging up bones for a ceremonial re-burial) still bore the weight of the loss of the daughter, cried and lamented thus:

> Eleni, Eleni, you died far from home with no one near you. I've shouted and cried for five years, Eleni, my unlucky one, but you haven't heard me. I don't have the courage to shout any more. Eleni, Eleni, my lost soul. You were a young plant, but they did not let you blossom. You've been here for five years. Soon you'll leave. Then where will I go? What will I do? Five years ago I put a beautiful bird into the ground, beautiful partridge. But now what will I take out? Now what will I find?[12]

The funeral dirges by Luo female mourners vary in their intensity depending on the age, status, or relationship of the mourner to the deceased. It is a common practice for mourners to adopt unique mourning styles that merit the attention of the other mourners present. For example, a widow may mourn more bitterly and for sustained minutes since it carries certain social advantage: she gains respect and admiration for showing devotion to her dearly beloved and departed husband. Others wail and dramatize their mourning sometimes so as to be accepted into the gracious social set of those who behave appropriately at the funeral.

The second component consists of men mourning. Men generally do not weep and wail like women do. A sad demeanor maintained throughout the entire funeral is usually a convincing outward sign of mourning. It is as if they are required to fight tears in public and try to remain calm and emotionless. They walk into the homestead of the deceased in somber mood.

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[12] Loring M. Danforth, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), 15. According to another scholar of Greek culture, Margaret Alexiou, such lamentations serve to pay public tribute to the dead and assuage any anger the deceased may have toward the living. Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, c2002), 44 & 166.

Sometimes their entry is a dramatic event marked by utterances of rhythmic dances and war cries (*gweyo*) and questions similar to those of the women (above). As they run around in the compound carrying clubs, spears, or waving twigs of trees in their hands, they often stop to stage brief dances while mingling with other mourners.

The third component consists of the community mourning the deceased. By the very fact of its presence around the deceased, the community is making an important statement: celebrating death is a communal affair in which each person has explicit duties to perform. A noted French ethnographer rightly observes that "During mourning, the living mourners and the deceased constitute a special group, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead."[13] Each individual member of the community engages in ritual to send a collective message to the entire community. Each time a new party of mourners arrives at the homestead, they are joined by a few others who have performed their individual mourning. The old and new mourners recreate a rising crescendo of wails. The entire community displays a rich choreography of mourning rituals, intensely personal and rich cultural gestures. This component celebrates the life of the deceased while at the same time expressing sorrow at the painful fact of death.

These Luo funeral customs differ in some ways from some of the documented sermons that featured in the early Church. In the third century, Christian mourners performed ritual mourning that irked some of the renowned teachers of the time. The teachers issued guidelines to serve as acceptable mourning standards. A section of Basil of Caesarea's homily addressed situations in which the Christian faithful exhibited violent grief and spontaneous lamentations.

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[13] Van Gennep, "The Rites of Passage" in Antonius C. G. M. Robben, *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 214.

Basil's words echo the sentiments of ecclesiastical authorities of his day who sought to control such practices:

> Therefore neither men nor women should be permitted too much lamentation and mourning. They should show moderate distress in their affliction, with only a few tears, shed quietly and without moaning, wailing, tearing clothes and groveling in the dust, or committing any other indecency commonly practiced by the ungodly.[14]

Basil was renowned for his literary and rhetorical excellence. His thoughts are fairly representative of the preaching that characterized his age, of Christian teachers who sought to control the powerful visceral emotional states that spontaneously swept over the grieving mourners. John Chrysostom went even further to explicitly persuade the faithful not to express themselves freely:

> What are you doing, woman? Tell me, would you shamelessly strip yourself naked in the middle of the marketplace, you, who are part of Christ, in the presence of men and in the very market-place? And would you tear your hair, rend your garments and wail loudly, dancing and preserving the image of Bacchic women, without regard to your offense to God?[15]

There are many such examples. Suffice it to illustrate that these clearly are examples of Christian teachers who made deliberate efforts to restrain the spontaneity of their people. We can begin to see in a broad way how a Christian teacher, steeped in a tradition that frowned at mourners who freely expressed the cutting pain of sorrow at the realization of the finality of death of their loved ones, will naturally be ill at ease with Luo funeral customs.

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[14] Basil of Caesarea, *de Gratiarum Actione*, cited in Migne, P.G., 31.229c.

[15] Migne, P.G. 59.346 cited in Gail Holst-Warhaft, *The Cue For Passion: Grief and its Political Uses* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 34.

5.3.3 Vigils (*budho*)

Mourning takes place simultaneously with *budho* (a series of vigils in honor of the deceased). In fact the period of mourning continues even beyond the burial, as we shall see at the end of the final funeral ritual. Ordinarily mourners must stay within the compound of the deceased throughout several days and nights until the day of burial. The chief mourners are customarily required to be present and visible throughout the days preceding the burial.

Budho is characterized by a general atmosphere of subdued silence. This silence is interrupted from time to time by new funeral participants arriving to perform their mourning. To my question on the importance of *budho* I received diverse responses but perhaps an informant's response reflects the breath and depth of the other responses most comprehensively. Oguna said that "*Ndalo budho e liel tiende ni jolieil yudo thuolo mar kuyo kanyakla kaluwre gi mirima, yot gi pek ma giwinjo, wich kuot, to kata ka onge lit ma ng'ato nigo*." (Days and nights of vigils afford mourners collectively an opportunity to grieve over their anger, relief, guilt, confusion, depression, sadness, or indifference.)

Mourners sob. They maintain their composure and talk in small groups. Among the subjects they speak about mostly in hushed voices are death, their feelings and fears, and memories of the deceased. The funeral becomes a public venue in which members of the community support each other in grief. They also have the opportunity to talk about and view the deceased at any time throughout the day or night.

5.3.4 Bathing and preparing the corpse

During the course of vigils, the chief mourners, usually sisters-in-law, perform a ritualized bathing of the corpse. Ongong'a rightly points out: "The washing takes place near the door of the

first wife, *mikayi*."[16] The corpse is washed with cold water, sometimes mixed with assorted aromatic herbs. It is then attired in hide or its best clothes, a change from the old practice of wrapping it in *pien ruath* (the skin of a predetermined bull).[17] The legs are tied together. The finger nails and toe nails are carefully trimmed. In addition to these rituals, in the case of a man the head is shaved and all hair removed. In the case of a woman, the hair is combed; a woman is never buried with plaited hair.

The purpose of the ritual bathing is to physically cleanse the corpse thoroughly. There are regional variations in regard to manner of bathing, method, style, and accessories used for bathing the corpse and temporal position. Although only a few mourners actually bathe the corpse, as in the case of many other rituals done by a few mourners only, news of what is going is usually shared in mourners' whispers and hushed voices and spreads all around the compound. The entire group of mourners is technically involved in performing this ritual.

The general reason that my informants alluded to ritual bathing of the corpse was the mysterious presence of the deceased mystically represented by the corpse: the symbolism of the person made fully present by the corpse. An informant said that "*Maiti nyaka mi luor kendo chunye nyaka kow gi sironyo kaka kar nyalo wa; wuon maiti nitie e piny madiere: en kodwa gi ling' ling' to bende en e wuoth mar piny machielo*" (We must honor the corpse and appease and send off their spirit with pride and pomp as best as we possibly can, for the owner of the corpse is secretly present with us and at the same time is in the interim between this world and the next). This informant points at two important beliefs of the Luo. First, the body is an important physical

[16] Ongong'a, *The Luo Conecept of Death*, 46.

[17] Ogutu, *Ker Jaramogi is Dead: Who Shall Lead My People?* (Kisumu, Kenya: Sundowner Institute Press, 2010), 11.

representation of the entire person. All the rituals performed by the living are important in uniting the living and the deceased. Of these two realities Malinowski insightfully observes that

> The ceremonial of death which ties the survivors to the body and rivets them to the place of death, the beliefs in the existence of the spirit, in its beneficent influences or malevolent intentions, in the duties of a series of commemorative or sacrificial ceremonies—in all this religion counteracts the centrifugal forces of fear, dismay, demoralization, and provides the most powerful means of reintegration of the group's shaken solidarity and of the re-establishment of its morale.[18]

Second, the informant speaks of the belief that the body and soul of the deceased are in the process of separating with the community and that those still alive consider the deceased as living and at the same time dead. This is a clear instance of the full expression of Mbiti's oxymoronic phrase: the deceased as the "living dead". This transition and contrariety has been studied and explained well by Robert Hertz:

> The stay of the soul among the living is somehow illegitimate and clandestine. It lives, as it were, marginally in the two worlds: if it ventures into the after-world, it is treated there like an intruder; here on earth it is an importunate guest whose proximity is dreaded. As it has no resting place it is doomed to wander incessantly, waiting anxiously for the feast which will put an end to its restlessness.[19]

Fear and respect converge in the washing and the general care of the body. The washing also demonstrates the faith of the living in the transition that is taking place and is therefore much more than assuring the deceased of the love of the living.

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[18] Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays*, 53. The Luo belief of the interim between this world and the next as articulated by Opundo is not a belief peculiar to the Luo. It is a popular Christian eschatological concept of the "intermediate" existence between a Christian's death and resurrection from the dead. It is also a prominent feature in Islamic eschatology: Barzakh is the intermediate state in which Moslems believe the soul of the deceased is transferred across the boundaries of the mortal realm and remains inactive until the Judgment Day (Qiyamah) (Qur'an, 23, 100).

[19] Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, tr. Claudia Needham (London: Cohen & West, 1960 [1907]), 18.

5.3.5 Digging the grave (*kunyo*)

Digging the grave of a deceased member of the community is an important undertaking that is done according to certain prescribed customs. It is usually done by the middle-aged male relatives of the deceased. Although the rules governing the burial site of all members of the family are always clear, in practice these rules are usually contested. A lot of deliberations go into deciding the spot of burial.

A few of my informants referred to an old tradition of burial inside of the house. Apparently a corpse was interred in a grave that was dug in the earthen floor. This information is consistent with some older studies such as John Roscoe's, who refers to burial in the house as an old standard practice.[20] It is also found in other African societies; for example, Basden writes of the Ibo: "When the head of family dies, of a chief, he is buried in a deep grave beneath the floor of his private apartment."[21]

One of the reasons behind the burial spot is the Luo's understanding of the spiritual significance of the graves and their attachment to the "ancestral lands". Shipton writes that graves are sacred places because the Luo consider the ancestors as present and active forces in their homes.[22] The grave of a Luo becomes a shrine of sorts, a constant reminder to the living of the dead. It serves as shrine for the spirit of the family member whose existence now continues in spirit form.

Locating the spot for the grave and determining the time to begin digging are usually controversial matters. As soon as the spot has been identified, digging usually begins at night about 9 o'clock and is finished in the morning around 4 o'clock. If it becomes necessary to

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[20] John Roscoe, *The Northern Bantu: An Account of Some Central African Tribes of the Uganda Protectorate* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1915), 286.
[21] Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, 114.
[22] Shipton, *Mortgaging The Ancestors*, 163.

change the location of the grave due to rocky surfaces, the time to begin digging, unfavorable weather conditions, or other unforeseen circumstances then more deliberations are usually called for.

Other possible controversial areas include the position of the grave relative to the home of the *Wuon dala* (the head of the homestead). According to Ogutu,

> The Luo were very strict about the time and site for burial, which has shifted from *i ot* (inside the house) to *Dir Agola* (beside the house), *Dier dala* (center of the homestead for the homestead head), and *Kar ik* (homestead cemetery).[23]

There are restrictions on who is to dig the grave. For example a man whose wife is pregnant is not permitted to dig a grave lest he causes a premature birth of his baby.[24]

A particular recent burial case deserves a special mention at this point to illustrate the Luo's attachment to their "ancestral land" for burial. A prominent Luo lawyer, Silvano Melea Otieno, died in Nairobi, about 800 miles away from his ancestral home in Nyalgunga (Luo land). Otieno (popularly known as SM) had been married to Wamboi Otieno, a Kikuyu (a Bantu community from central Kenya). The couple had lived in their *house* (a Luo's dwelling place outside of Luo land is never a "home" but a "house") in Ngong, a suburban town of Nairobi. A dispute over SM's burial arose. While Wamboi arranged for SM to be buried in Ngong, the members of the SM clan on the other hand demanded that SM had to be buried according to Luo burial customs, which meant a burial at his birthplace in Nyalgunga. A long protracted court case ensued. SM was eventually buried in Nyalgunga after nine months. During a cross-examination in the Kenyan High Court, Omolo Siranga, a witness for SM's clan, gave an explanation which may serve as an apt summery of how SM exemplified the Luo customs:

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[23] Ogutu, *Ker Jaramagi is Dead*, 11.
[24] Shiino, 216.

> . . . the customs of our grandfathers. In terms of burial, a male Luo over 12 years can only be buried at home. The clan takes the responsibility of the burial. His wife is not even allowed not only to bury her husband, not even to touch his body after he has died. The children become members of the clan after their father's death. The customs do not allow the children to decide or point out where their father should be buried.[25]

5.3.6 *Tero buru* (Ash ceremony)

(*Tero Buru* literally means "taking the ashes") On the day of burial, the corpse is laid outside of his house. An informant explained the sequence of events as follows:

> *Jaduong' ipielo oko e gamb dhoode maduong' kendo chieng'ni ema ji teroe buche. Jomachuo yworo e kwonde duto mar piny, tero buche e thim, mar dhi chulo kuor ka gikedo gi wasikgi e thim, kendo ginyalo neko ka dwarore.*
> (The old man is laid just outside of his house and it is on this day that mourners perform *buru* ritual for him. Young men come from all directions of the country, take his *buru* to the wilderness to fight with the enemies, they may kill if need arises.)

Omwony expresses an observation at this point of the funeral, namely that the last formal acts that the entire society performs directly to the deceased are now carried out. The funeral rituals reach their fever pitch with *tero buru*. *Tero buru* (or simply *buru*) is the most controversial and misunderstood of all the Luo funeral rites. It is the Luo rite that most often baffles non-Luos and heightens their culture shock. It involves many ritual practices which calls for numerous and varied interpretations. It is generally carried out on the day of the burial, but the time and manner of performance (according to an interview with Professor Ogutu) may vary owing to different practices to be found in the southern or northern parts of Nyanza.

Reconstructing the accounts given by my informants, *buru* is traditionally enacted as follows: a party of men carrying spears, a rooster, and glowing embers smear and apply ash on their faces and bodies (hence the name *buru* [ash]). They hike defiantly and menacingly to a *pap*,

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[25] David Cohen and E.S. Atieno Adhiambo, *Burying SM: The Politics of Knowledge and Sociology of Power in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1992), 25.

a deserted field outside of the village about a mile or further away from the home of the deceased, preferably a former battleground. The participants engage in a mock war and dance drama as they go. They spear, club, and tease imaginary enemies. Once they reach the designated field, they slaughter the rooster by tearing it apart and letting its blood drip to the ground for the ancestors. The men then roast the rest of the rooster on the spot and consume it. While still at the field they run around randomly in groups of twos and threes, smashing shrubs with clubs and calling out loud names and taunting imaginary foes. They also engage in "virtue boasting" (*pakruok*) in which the deeds of the ancestors are lauded.[26]

The *buru* "war" party triumphantly returns home, where they are joyfully greeted by the other funeral attendants, who meet them jubilantly running or riding on garlanded cattle. Most of them hold long spears, wear funeral regalia, and play kudu horns. They continue to spear the nearby shrubs and bushes. The whole funeral assembly celebrates with great pomp by singing and playing instruments, and dancing.[27]

These accounts are corroborated by earlier scholars who examined Luo funeral rituals. Butt for example makes a good attempt at describing the *buru* ceremony as follows:

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[26] *Pakruok* is a complex genre of Luo speech in which a Luo parades virtues and instills traditional wisdom by talking rapidly, sometimes rhythmically and sharply. Examples of virtues and traditional wisdom that are usually expressed overtly or covertly are bravery, beauty, generosity, and selflessness. According to George Pickens, *pakruok* serves two major purposes, namely (1) lauding the great deeds of the ancestor and (2) self-praise of the messenger. George F. Pickens, *African Christian God-Talk: Mathew Ajuoga's Johera Narrative* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 148. *Pakruok* has appeared in numerous literatures especially in terse forms. See especially Peter S. O. Amuka, "The Play of Construction in the Speech of Africa: The Role of *Pakruok* and *Ngero* in Telling Culture in Dholuo" in, *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, eds. Ivan Karp and D. A. Masolo (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 89-104; Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics Among the Southern Luo*, 45-57.

[27] See also Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death*, 44-47; A typical song accompanying the buru rite must keep the participants cheerful and movements rhythmic but does not necessarily have to make sense. An example of a famous *buru* song goes as follows:

> Koriko gi koni kendo koriko gi kochaa.. tero buru (X2); River Nyando is not navigable……. tero buru (X2); But lake victoria has got hyacinthiii…tero buru (X2); Nyoyo mang'ich ok nyal melt BB… tero buru (X2); Agwata motuch ok nyal twomo nyuka…. tero buru (X2)

> Luo tribes were formally separated from each other by the *thim* – a stretch of bush country left unoccupied. Between segments of the same tribe there was no *thim*. The ritual demonstration of *tero buru* took place across these boundaries. It was the custom of the Luo in the past not to bury an important man, known for his wealth or for his military ability, until the whole tribe, or a large part of it, had crossed the *thim* and demonstrated in front of the homestead of the neighboring tribes. The demonstrations took the form of insults, challenges to fight and tempting parade of cattle. It was a matter of honor for the challenging party to stand their ground and defend their herds with their lives. Such demonstrations were also made against neighboring Bantu who had a similar structure to that of the Luo tribes. The demonstrating party was not usually attacked unless two *buru* parties of opposing tribes met. Sometimes, however, the opportunity was taken to try and raid the cattle of the neighboring tribe.[28]

Butt provides a general knowledge that does not include an in-depth understanding of the rites of *buru*. He does not attempt to interpret the rite or offer insights as to the significance of the ritual to the mourners or the society at large. He makes an important point: *buru* is typical and revered Luo customary practice that has a long history. Butt's account raises the question of how the deceased is incorporated into the rite itself.

A few other authors who describe Luo funeral rituals have tried to explain and comment on the meaning and significance of *buru*. Sean Egan, for example, adopts a popular explanation, namely that *buru* is a process of chasing away evil spirits.[29] Closely related to this view is Shiino's, who says it is a process of "accompanying the Spirit of the Deceased to the Former Battleground."[30] Ogutu provides a different purpose of the rite of *buru* as "driving off the cause and effects of death."[31] Ongong'a views highlights two reasons for the rite, namely (1) that *buru* was originally carried out during "tribal" war following the death of a warrior in a battle to demonstrate the Luo's military prowess and avenge the dead warrior. The meaning and

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[28] Butt, *The Nilotes of the Sudan and Uganda*, 110.

[29] Sean Egan, "S.M. Otieno: Kenya's Unique Burial Saga" in the *Daily Nation Newspapers*, Nairobi, April 27, 1987.

[30] Shiino, *Luo*, 216.

[31] Ogutu, *Ker Jaramogi is Dead*, 10.

performance of the ceremony was later extended to include every adult male (and sometimes woman) who had contributed socially to the solidarity of the group. (2) *Buru* is performed to send away the spirit and stop its influence from lingering around and about the living. Parker MacDonald Shipton describes purposes for *buru* that some of my informants also referred to, although not as clearly and concisely as Shipton describes it. Once the *buru* party arrives at the field, Shipton writes that

> A close agnate of the dead man ritually slaughtered the bird as a sacrifice (*misango*), dripping the blood from its neck on the ground for the ancestors to eat and roasting the bird on the spot for the men to pull apart and consume in the bush.[32]

Shipton quotes one of his informants in his study who observed that:

> It is our belief that when blood sprinkles or drops on the ground, the ancestors are already there waiting to receive it. The blood of the chicken [rooster] is feeding the ancestors, and the demons (*jochiende*) are driven away if at all they are angry. But the good ones remain.[33]

The *buru* party returns to the funeral to find the grave has been made ready for interment. There is an air of great enthusiasm in the funeral participants ready to move on beyond the pain and misery that was brought about by death. Great feasting usually marks the day of burial and has sometimes been erroneously been linked with *tero buru*. In some funeral contexts the ritual feasting very often turns into an occasion of ordinary rampant eating and lavish use of intoxicants and veritable orgies. It is possible at times that some funeral participants make use of

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[32] Parker Shipton, *The Nature of Entrustment: Intimacy, Exchange, and The Sacred in Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 162. Shipton's mention of a spear, an axe and a rooster are also described in another study in which he analyzes the roles of these key ritual elements. These symbols mediate and control the new relationship between the father and his son as the son "pierces" the wilderness beyond his paternal homestead to establish his own authority as a head of a new homestead. Shipton, *Mortgaging the Ancestors*, 91.

[33] Shipton, *The Nature of Entrustment*, 162.

the occasion provided by food and drink to indulge in an unrestrained sexual activity that again has been erroneously linked to *tero buru*.

While it is true that some sexual activity surrounds the rituals of *tero buru* and burial, it requires some explanation. The Luo, like many other African societies, believe that death brings corruption and makes those who are closest to the deceased ritually impure. One of the ways to deal with the perceived corruption and ritual impurity is reflected in the way the Luo handles its culturally created, highly formalized sexual rituals. That is why Shipton, writing about a particular case in his study where it was deemed necessary to change the time for *buru*, writes:

> Since in Luo country, no bereaved woman may have sex before the *buru* or risk bringing *chira* [a repercussion for failure to conform to some prescribed custom or ritual practice, usually manifested in the form of a disease] to the home and lineage, and since there were young women in the family, some of the elders felt that it was prudent to get *buru* out of the way early, lest anyone be tempted into sex before it.[34]

The ritualized sexual activity linked to *buru* is not unique to the Luo. It can also be found in the wider African traditional customs that in the recent past have fallen into heavy criticism by modern writers and social critics. Such critics denounce the dehumanizing aspects of some African traditional practices. Marie–Antoinette Sossou, for example, in a study of West African cultures insightfully points out that

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[34] Shipton, *Nature of Entrustment*, 162. Violet Nyambura Kimani's comprehensive treatment of *chira* in her study of the Luo deserves a mention. She refers to *chira* as a concept that broadly stands for an entire range of misfortunes which result from commission or omission of certain custom, social disharmonies, or breach of moral values. See her "Human Sexuality: Meaning and Purpose in Selected Communities in Contemporary Kenya," *The Ecumenical Review* 56, no. 4 (2004): 409. She also incorporates David Parkin's assertion

> *chira* does not fit, either conceptually or semantically, into such "traditional" anthropological categories as witchcraft, spirit possession, and ancestor "worship", for which roughly equivalent verbal concepts can be found in the Luo language. Chira is not translatable. It refers to a wasting disease sometimes culminating in death, which a victim or someone close to the victim has incurred through ignoring (not necessarily consciously) some kind of relationship taboo. The disease arises from an improper mixing of categories, which are normally kept distinct. In other words, it arises from a confusion of relationship boundaries. The basic idea behind it has much in common with that of "incompatible blood."

Kimani, "Human Sexuality," 409.

> . . . Widowhood practices are closely tied to cultural and traditional beliefs about death, ghosts, inheritance, feminine roles, family structure and family relationships. The overpowering belief in the ability of the ghost of a dead person to come back to dispute and haunt all kinds of things and relatives has reinforced and perpetuated the age-old practices of widowhood in Africa. . . . The belief that death brings corruption and the dead still have contact with the living, especially their closest partners in life, is one of the reasons used for subjecting widows to inhuman and humiliating customary practices. The satisfactory completion of these ceremonies, rituals and practices is therefore believed to help restore the balance and security, which the death had sought to overthrow. The people, due to superstitious beliefs, rationalize these practices with the argument that they perform important functions, such as giving the widows protection from their powerful deceased husbands.[35]

The importance of *buru* as an objective standard performance for restoring and preserving harmony within a segment of the Luo society cannot be overstated. The symbols and practices of *buru* highlight the cessation of personal survival of the deceased and signal a new situation in the funeral rites for the living. They emphasize that the deceased is no longer a regular member of the society. The status of the deceased has henceforth changed from a regular member of a social and cultural network to someone who is no longer physically present. The deceased continues to be part of the society, an existence that goes beyond the narratives of those who knew or were related to him or her. The mourners express in a public way that the deceased has henceforth assumed a mystical presence in the communion of the departed.

Buru is naturally followed by burial. The logical sequence in the two rites provides a major transition, a definitive moment of physical severance of the deceased from the community.

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[35] Marie-Antonette Sossou, "Widowhood practices in West Africa: The Silent Victims," in *International Journal of Social Welfare* 11, no. 3, (2002): 207.

5.3.7 Burial (*iko*)

Burials in Africa are generally known to be big events. Very often the entire village and neighboring villages attend the funeral of a villager even if the deceased was not known personally to them.

The Luo consider burial as a religious and cultural duty and it is therefore usually very well attended. So important is burial that if a Luo drowns in the lake or river and the body cannot be retrieved, or for any reason a Luo member is unaccounted for, a fictitious burial is performed with some special tree trunks buried to represent the missing body. Furthermore the Luo often gauge the success of any funeral by how well the burial is attended, the amount of food available to the mourners, and the overall intensity of the acts of mourning such as wailing and weeping among other acts.

Burial normally takes place between two and four o'clock in the afternoon. It is presumed that by this time the *buru* party is back, mourners who traverse the country to attend the funeral have arrived, and the sun is not directly overhead and therefore the weather is relatively favourable. The corpse is moved and placed near the grave and funeral participants gather around.

Before lowering the corpse into the grave, some rituals are observed. The chief mourners usually stay closest to the corpse. A male Luo with classificatory kinship to the deceased, usually closest agnates or any male with honorable reputation and good oratorical skills, normally presides over the burial ceremony. *Neno* (literary "word") takes place. A designated person shares the life history eulogy of the deceased. Speeches are delivered by some of the chief mourners in the order of their closeness to the deceased and kinship seniority. A man's oldest

son, for example, usually speaks first followed by other siblings in the order of their mothers' marriage. Finally the dead man's wives speak beginning with the first wife (*mikayi*).

At this time it is usually common to have people show up at the graveside with claims of what the deceased owed them such as services rendered and unpaid for, unfulfilled promises by the deceased, or children sired outside of wedlock by the deceased. At one of the funerals I attended, a man who stood not far from me seemed to be grumbling in an audible whisper. He was hushed to be quiet. I later learned that the disgruntled funeral participant sought to resolve an age-old land dispute which the locals knew about and did not consider a matter of urgency; hence the prompt silencing. *Anyuola* (agnatic kin) usually assume the responsibility of paying all the dead man's debts and unfulfilled promises without question since no one would dare fabricate a story to steal from a dead man lest his spirit return to haunt the liar.

The corpse is lowered into the grave. (In the recent times coffins have replaced hides and skins that were used to wrap the corpses.) Two or three men go into the grave to receive the corpse. They place it on ground lined with soft grass. They are helped out and soon the chief mourners beginning with close relatives throw a handful of earth over the body. The gravediggers assist in shoveling the earth back into the grave. Nobody leaves until the grave is filled, a mound of earth is formed, and a Luo grave is recognizable.

Completion of burial does not mark the end of the funeral. In fact in some areas it is the official beginning of the mourning period. Several groups and individuals such as *wagogni* (female relatives customarily married in far places and who usually arrive on foot) are expected to arrive after burial.

5.3.8 Funeral bonfire (*Magenga liel*)

The evening of the day of burial is an important one. A bonfire is lit at night not far from the grave. Funeral participants still present at the homestead gather around the fire. The fire usually lasts three nights after the burial for a male, and four nights for a woman.[36]

It is common to hear words such as "*owewa*" (he/she has left us) near the fire. My informants pointed at two levels of meaning of the bonfire. On the first level the bonfire provides the practical needs of warmth and light to the mourners. On second level the fire enables the living to assert their presence and so cast off any evil spirits that could be present at the home. Ongong'a alludes to this second mystical meaning in his own study when he writes:

> A big fire is then prepared near the grave to ward off other evil influences and also to keep away wild animals that may wander into the homestead. Above all the fire in a symbolic way is meant for the soul to warm itself before it actually settles among the dead.[37]

Whether for the deceased or the funeral participants, the lit fire signifies a new phase of life with the deceased having taken a new form of existence. The fire exists to exemplify a separation which, according to the interpretation of the noted French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, marks a transition.[38] Van Gennep's observation (which I will treat at greater length in the next section) accurately reflects the situation of the Luo when he writes that "It is a transitional period for the survivors, and they enter through rites of separation and emerge from it through rites of re-integration into society."[39]

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[36] Richard Kisiara, "Some Sociopolitical Aspects of Luo Funerals," *Anthropos*, 93, no. 1./3 (1998): 129.
[37] Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death*, 47.
[38] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London 1977), 21.
[39] Van Gennep, "The Rites of Passage" in *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader,* Antonius C. G. M. Robben (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 213.

5.3.9 Cleansing rites: *Liedo* (Shaving)

After burial has been performed, the days following are filled with a series of cleansing rituals. Cleansing rituals are largely private because they do not require the participation of the entire group of mourners. Thus, cleaning the hoes, baskets used in removing soil from the grave, and ropes used by grave diggers (*jokunyo*), for example, is performed in the river the day after the burial and could be considered one such private rite. Shaving rituals are another example, one that deserves our attention.

On or about the third day after the burial ceremony, *liedo* (shaving ceremony) is performed. My informants were all very conversant with this ritual which consists in *nyamererwa* (a widow past childbearing age, experienced in Luo customs and funerary practices in particular) shaving the heads of the closest relatives of the deceased.[40] *Nyamrerwa*, the official presider in this ritual, prepares *manyasi* (a purgative medicinal concoction) and administers to the relatives according to their order of birth beginning with the oldest.[41] If the deceased had more than one wife, the wives are shaved in the order of their marriage beginning with the first wife.

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[40] Also described by Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death*, 51-2.

[41] The composition of *manyasi* is surrounded by secrecy, known only to the medical expert who prepares it. It is generally known to consist of various mixtures of plants. Even Wenzel Geissler and Ruth Jane Prince who have painstakingly studied the mundane practices and ritual acts of the Luo can only offer a vague and general treatment of the exact composition of *manyasi*. They write that "its ingredients are unknown to the patients, but . . . apart from herbs, it may include earth, from the place where the *kwer* was spoiled or from another spot that has been in contact with the persons involved, pointing to the involvement of ancestral force in the causation and healing of *chira*." See *The Land is Dying*, 207. What, then, is *manyasi*? What are its pharmacological properties? *Manyasi* may be classified as an *adoptogen*, a tonic remedy used to restore balance and health. David Winston has studied some remedies commonly found in the traditional settings that are similar to *chira*. The Chinese *Qi* tonic, Tibetan *Rasayana*, and Central American *Susto* bear resemblance with *manyasi*. In these cases *adoptogens* are used to enhance productivity and performance of the affected individual. See David Winston, *Adaptogens: Herbs for Strength, Stamina, and Stress*, (Relief, Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions/Bear & Company, 2007). As to the pharmacological properties of *manyasi* we turn our attention to Brekhman and Dardymov who pioneered the studies of the nature of adaptogenic substances as early as 1969. The authors wrote that an adaptogen (i) is relatively non-toxic to the recipient; (ii) has "non-specific" activity and acts by increasing resistance of the organism to a broad spectrum of adverse biological, chemical, and physical factors: (iii) tend to help regulate or normalize organ and system function within the organism. See http://www.herbaltherapeutics.net/Adaptogens.pdf.

The shaving gives a distinctive mark to the chief mourners. The widow(s) may be inducted into the widowhood state at this point. Other times for the induction may be considered, if for example, a certain agnatic kin must be present at the occasion. The induction consists in *nyamrerwa*, that is, tying a string made out of grass (*okola*) around her waist at this time. The widow is released from widowhood by the symbolic breaking of *okola* in the ritual of *chodo kola* (breaking the *kola* and the implication of the release from widowhood state are described below).

Liedo is to be understood against the backdrop of corruption and ritual impurity that the Luo see as intrinsically linked to death and funerary rites. Malinowski pointed it out well when he wrote

> Thus the funerary rites are considered as unclean and soiling, the contact with the corpse as defiling and dangerous, and the performers have to wash, cleanse their body, remove all traces of contact, and perform ritual lustrations.[42]

It is against this background that the Luo regard all those who come into physical contact with a corpse as ritually unclean. The paraphernalia of the deceased such as the eating utensils, hides, skins, blankets, and chairs and anything else that he came into contact with are not used after his death, at least not before cleansing them. In the shaving rites the closest relatives shave their hair (including facial hair) from the day after the funeral.

The chief mourners are required to remain at the funeral at least for eight days. They are not expected to socialize with the rest of the society. However, due to unavoidable circumstances some members may have to return to their respective homes as soon as burial has been completed. In practice *liedo* is arranged to take place any time after the day of burial. When my own father died in 1982, my entire family was shaved a day after his burial.

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[42] Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays*, 50.

I sought to know the significance of *liedo.* My informants gave me a wide range of reasons: (1) To cleanse the closest relatives of the deceased from the "shadow" (*tipo*) of the deceased; (2) to place a special sign on the chief mourners; (3) to underscore the deep loss to the clan; (4) to dramatize the horror of death and the value of life, and to exhort the members of the clan to keep their bonds with the deceased alive; (5) it is believed that life is concentrated in the hair and so shaving the hair symbolizes death; the growth that ensues signals rejuvenation and indicates the strengthening of life.

Shiinto rightly points out that there are three types of *liedo*.[43] The first is usually meant for the wives and children of the deceased. In some practices this shaving also serves to mark the official beginning of mourning period. The second type is meant for children only, usually performed between two weeks to a month after burial. It is after this shaving that the children are freed to step out of their compounds and interact freely with the rest of the society. The third type is meant for widows. The widows' shaving rites free them from mourning taboos; for example, a widow can from this point on accept a man for *tero chola* (described below). *Keyo nyinyo* (distributing the articles left by the deceased, also described below) also can be performed since cleansing has facilitated a new situation: purity and a new beginning.

5.3.10 Widow cleansing (*Lago*/*Tero Dhako* or *Chodo Kola* or *Golo Kola*)

Very often a man dies and leaves a young wife (*miaha*). Tradition requires that on the night of the burial, as part of cleansing rituals, such a woman must be taken by another man who henceforth becomes her new husband. Even if the woman is past the child-bearing age, she is customarily required to enter into the leviratic union.

[43] Shiino, 218.

This custom is found among other Nilotic peoples such as the Nuer.[44] It is also found among a large number of societies within and outside of Africa.[45] Writing in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Edward Westermarck is one of the most influential scholars in the study of the history of human marriage. Westermarck studied numerous accounts of marriage in many societies around the world taking into account cross-sectional comparative ethnographic data and cross-cultural differences in the societies that practice levirate marriage[46] It is famously referred to as "widow inheritance," which is a standard nomenclature pertaining to such customary practices in many societies that practice this custom.[47]

Among the Luo leviratic marriage is popularly known simply as *ter*. The custom has suffered a lot of misinterpretations. The misinterpretation usually comes about if the woman is objectified as a property to be "inherited," often against her wishes. The proper meaning of *ter*

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[44] Shipton, *The Nature of Entrustment*, 165.

[45] Literature on the subject is abundant. Some background studies include James George Frazer, Literature on the subject is abundant. Good introductory studies can be obtained in some pioneer studies such as James George Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend and Law*, New York: Avenel Books, 1988 (originally published in 1918); E. Sapir, "Terms of Relationship and the Levirate," *American Anthropologist* 18, no. 3 (1916): 327-337.

[46] Westermarck provided important ground-breaking information from his seminal work of his Moroccan field-work that emphasized on the relationship between rituals and moral beliefs. His scholarly fame, however, was questioned and his reputation suffered remarkably. For the relevant discussions on levirate see especially his *History of Human Marriage*, 2nd edition (New York and London: MacMillan and Co., 1894), 510-514.

[47] My informants and available literature show that the Luo's practice of *ter* is consistent with other levirate marriage practices the world over. As with the case of ancient Hebrews, *ter* is a standard cultural marriage regulation whereby a man's widow must marry his surviving brother in order to continue the relationship which was initiated in the couple's original marriage. Although the practice is theoretically the same in many cultures, the reasons for the second union vary from society to society. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, for example, the rationale of this practice is understood in terms of the bride price system. Since a man's family has paid a substantial sum as well as other economic and social services to acquire the reproductive powers of his wife, the society reasons that the deceased man's clan retain these rights in her even after the death of her husband. For more discussion on Igbo marriage beliefs and practices see Amobi Linus Ilika, "Women's Perception of Partner Violence in a Rural Igbo Community," *African Journal of Reproductive Health/ La Revue Africaine de la Santé Reproductive*, 9, no. 3 (2005): 80. Among the Hebrews, the institution seems to be similar to the Luo with slight variations. Any children of a levirate marriage were considered to be the descendents of the woman's original husband, who was usually an older brother of her current partner. In the Hebrew case the institution reinforced an emphasis on the inheritance through first born sons. See fuller discussions in Dvora E. Weisberg, *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism* (Hadassah-Brandeis Institute Series on Jewish Women; Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2009); Weisberg, "The Widow of Our Discontent: Levirate Marriage in the Bible and Ancient Israel," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28, 4 (2004): 403-42; Eryl W. Davies, "Inheritance Rights and The Hebrew Levirate Marriage" *Vêtus Testamentum* 31, 3 (1981).

lies in the Luo recognition of the need for stability of the family and permanence of marriage. Correctly understood, a male relative of the deceased (*jater*), usually a brother, takes over the guardianship of the deceased's family, which by implication includes the wife. All property of the deceased stays intact within the family. The widow remains married to the deceased and the deceased's entire clan with whatever rights there are for married women. She is not culturally the wife of the *jater*. The *jater* is her guardian.

All informants and available written sources agree that widow cleansing as a pre-requisite for restoring normalcy entails neutralizing the assumed cultural impurity and avoiding the dreaded mystical retribution (*chira*). Ambasa-Shisanya rightly highlights the salient points of *ter*:

> . . . Women are expected to observe a cleansing ritual . . . before being re-incorporated into society…. a widow was confined to her homestead for a whole year, since she was considered as culturally impure and dangerous to the community. During this time, a widow had a dream where she engaged in sex with the deceased. The sex dream was an indicator that the widow was free to be cleansed. Indeed, widowhood taboos were lifted after the final post-burial ritual where the life of the deceased was celebrated. Thereafter, widows were given to men in the community to guard them, with a view to providing material and emotional needs.[48]

The ritual of "cleansing" the widow requires our special attention. If it becomes necessary that permanent arrangements for the widow's re-marriage are to be made at a different time from her ritual incorporation into the larger society, then all that is needed is to perform a sexual ritual that is understood to cut the cord (*okola*) which separates the widow from her deceased husband. For this purpose a *jatiek kwer* (a ritual cleanser whose sole duty is to fulfill a customary law), usually from within the clan, or a *jakowiny* (an outsider) may be considered.

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[48] C. R. Ambasa-Shisanya, "Widowhood in the era of HIV/AIDS: A case study of Siaya District, Kenya," *Journal of Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS* 4, no. 2, (2007).

There is a keen attention to the obligatory sexual intercourse which is an important centerpiece of the ritual and which adds popularity and notoriety to the Luo and their funeral rituals. If a designated *jatiek kwer* or a *jakowiny* is not available, the clan enlists the service of a professional "cleanser", usually a middle-aged man who, according to Chillo-Ayayo, is considered to be a sexual pervert or psychopath capable of doing what an average clan person cannot ordinarily do.[49] The "cleanser" is usually provided with alcoholic beverages to inebriate and desensitize him in order to lessen his sense of good judgment. When darkness descends, he is escorted to the widow's house by some members of the family who supervise the rite to ensure that the sex ritual actually occurs. The *jatiek kwer*, *jakowiny*, or the "professional cleanser", according to Violet Kimani, assumed the state of contamination or "uncleanness", thus accepting to be separated from the clan, much like a sacrificial lamb that takes on the blemish of the ritual uncleanness of the clan.[50]

The prime function of cleansing is to free the widow from *okola* (bondage). Secondarily, since it is open to procreation, it enables the widow to beget children so as to perpetuate the deceased's lineage. After the ritual cleansing has been successfully performed, the widow is free to re-marry or to be "inherited".[51]

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[49] Ocholla-Ayayo, *Psychical, Social and Cultural Issues Relating to HIV/AIDS Containment and Transmission in Africa, With Special Reference to Kenya*. Nairobi: Population Studies Research Institute , University of Nairobi.

[50] Kimani, "Human Sexuality," 408.

[51] For studies on *ter*, see for example Michael C. Kirwen, *African Widows* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979); Nancy Luke, "The Cultural Significance of Widowhood: Widow Inheritance and the Position of Luo Widows in the 1989 Kenya Census". Paper prepared for the Virtual Conference on African Households, Population Studies Centre, November 21-24, 2001, University of Pennsylvania.

Many scholars have examined "Widow Inheritance" from the point of view of the challenge the custom poses on health. Such studies include A. Kunda, "Pressure to ban sexual cleansing in Zambia" *AIDS Analysis Africa*, Vol. 5, 2, 1995; Butlerys, M., F. Musanganire et. al., "Traditional Mourning Customs and the Spread of HIV-1 in Rural Rwanda: A Target For AIDS Prevention?" *AIDS* 8, no. 6 (1994); I. Luginnah et. al., "Challenges of a Pandemic: HIV/AIDS related Problems Affecting Kenyan widows," *Social Science & Medicine* 60, no. 6 (2005).

5.3.11 Mourners' departure after burial (*kee*)

After the burial is complete mourners disperse (*kee*). Mourners who are not immediately related to the deceased may leave at their pleasure. However, the chief mourners and close agnates are required to be at the funeral for some days, at least eight days before they return to their respective homes. When they leave, they may not simply leave at their convenience. They must follow a certain cultural timing and funerary rhythm. Their departure is to be done in an orderly fashion which usually makes *kee* an important component of the funeral rituals.

Among the Luo, as in many African societies, the status of an individual is determined by consanguineous and affinal relationships. Every Luo has an important role in the larger web of relationships. One of the places where the significance of these relationships comes to public notice is in the ritual of *kee*. Close agnates' exit from the funeral is not a random movement, but an orderly ritual that respects each of the members of the family and is performed by how age determines hierarchy and the authority of that family member.

As in many societies in Africa, the principle of eldership becomes operational when the first-born son or daughter and the family depart first. A lineage is always "represented by the oldest member present."[52] The first born is followed by the second, the third, and so on in that order. Care is taken to allow some time to elapse, say a day, between the departure of one party and the next. The departure of the family members must always be gradual to allow time for recognition of each departing family and healing of remaining kin. The whole rite of *kee* may take as long as there are sons and daughters to depart.

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[52] Igor Kopytoff, "Ancestors as Elders in Africa" in *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, & Representation*, eds. Roy Richard Grinker and Christopher B. Steiner (Malden, MA; Oxford, UK; Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 413.

5.3.12 *Keyo Nyinyo* (Sharing and dividing the property of the deceased)

Some articles belonging to the deceased are usually placed over his grave. Articles such as jewelry, pipe, calabash, spear, *kom* (three-legged stool) are usually placed over the freshly heaped mound of earth that fills the grave. These articles together with other substantial property of the deceased – clothes, furniture, dishes, calabashes, and cooking pots – are divided among the deceased's wives, children, and other agnatic kin.

Various kin and homestead members often lay claim of inheritance to the deceased's property; hence the distribution and sharing of such items at times become acrimonious and lead to family feuds and sibling rivalries. In one funeral incident I observed, a married daughter confronted her younger brother regarding some of their father's articles. In the end the woman left with the dead man's shirts and a pair of shoes, while her brother took the man's coat and hat.

Certain symbolic objects that are identified with deep family roots and Luo ethnic identity, however, may not be distributed. Although the value that such objects hold usually varies in the different parts of Luo community, it is commonly agreed that certain objects are treasured because of their symbolic value as explained by Shipton:

> Spears and leather shields (*kuot* if made of a buffalo hide, *okwomba* if made of a lighter cow- or bull hide) Luo associate with virility, leadership and heroic battles. Four- or three-legged figwood stools are associated with ancestors. Fly whisks and beaded hats (*ogut tigo*) are both symbols of male authority. Funeral cloaks and head dresses are often spectacularly decorated with furry skins, ostrich feathers, hippo and warthog tasks, wild cat or python skins.[53]

All articles shared and distributed are important to the living, much like the relics are to Christian believers as we saw in the previous chapter. They have a certain quality of sacredness in them by virtue of having belonged to the deceased. However, some of the deceased's property bestows

[53] Shipton, *Nature of Entrustment*, 180.

special responsibilities on the recipients. An informant rightly pointed out that ancestral land, animals, or other large property represent family wealth and must be given only to a man's surviving sons or other kin.

5.3.13 *Yawo dhoot* (Opening the door) and *Tedo* (Cooking)

Kee after burial does not imply that the homestead of the deceased is deserted by mourners. On the contrary, it is also a time when different groups and individual mourners come to the homestead of the deceased.

The integration of the life of the family and society continues with other minor rituals such as serving a meal by *wagogni* (the women), a ritual popularly referred to as *yawo dhoot* (opening the door) and *tedo* (cooking).[54] In these rituals the women married in distant locations return and make their way into the home (symbolized by opening the door) and prepare a meal for guests and the funeral participants still present at the home.

The married women who return to their home after burial are the center of these rituals. The women traditionally hurry to the funeral as soon as they hear the sad news; often they barely or sometimes never make it by the time of burial. As such they never have the luxury of time or presence of mind to present their best selves or their husbands and children that have not been seen by the clan for a period of time.

The period after *kee* affords them the opportunity to return to their homes in a dignified manner. The women bring along their husbands whose arrivals are usually anticipated and widely talked about. Ongong'a writes of this time "From the first day of burial onwards, more people keep coming, especially *oche*, sons-in-law. They may bring gifts of flour for preparing

[54] See also Shipton, *The Nature of Entrustment*, 163-4.

beer, baskets of millet, guinea fowl, he-goats, or rams."[55] *Oche* are expected to arrive in a dignified manner and demonstrate their affinal link to the larger network of the family through their wives.

2.2.4.13 Final ceremony

Long after the burial has been conducted, approximately a year,[56] family members and friends converge at the home of the deceased to perform a memorial feast in honor of the deceased. This final feast is usually considered as the end of funeral rites of a deceased member of the society.

Although only a few of my informants have participated in the final ceremony, they all underscored its importance. This final ritual has many names including *rapar* (memorial or commemoration) or *duogo e liel* (returning to the funeral, or simply *duogo*).[57] These names serve to illustrate the importance of a final ritual tradition that keeps the memory of the deceased alive.

The purpose of the final ceremony is to remember and mollify the deceased and to provide comfort to living members of the community. This final ceremony affords parents, children, brothers and sisters, and affines of the deceased an opportunity to gather and enjoy the company of each other. Food is served to all present. *Kong duogo* (alcohol for "returning") is served. Attendees join in the music and dance, and the celebration usually continues through the night of the *rapar*.

This final ceremony puts a very definite closure on the Luo funeral rituals. The whole process of separation between the deceased and the rest of the community members that begins

[55] Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death*, 48.
[56] Wenzel and Jane, *The Land is Dying*, 304.
[57] Wenzel and Jane, *The Land is Dying*, 304.

with *muocho yuak* is done in bits and finds its conclusion in this final ceremony. Ongong'a summarizes it thus:

> The final funeral ceremony completes the act of separation of the deceased from the living. This is what they have been aiming at since the death of the family member. It marks the end of a sorrowful phase and fear of revenge by the deceased on the living, and it opens the beginning of another life.[58]

None of my respondents gave me a detailed or comprehensive answer to my question of what the final ceremony does specifically for the deceased other than to mollify them. Since the concept and practice of final ceremony is not unique to the Luo people, I can rely on some of the relevant theoretical underpinnings from Robert Hertz's study. Hertz's study demonstrates the universality of the final funeral ceremonies and sheds light on what the Luo do not spell out explicitly:

> The final ceremony thus profoundly alters the condition of the deceased: it awakens him from his bad sleep and enables him to live a secure social life again. It makes a wandering shade into a "Father".[59]

The alteration and transformation to which Hertz refers is consistent with the Luo belief of the finality that awaits every living dead: their incorporation into the world of the ancestors. *Muocho yauk* ritual is linked to the final ceremony: it calls friends and relatives of the deceased to begin a series of celebrations that ends with the "Final ceremony." The final ceremony celebrates and formally marks the final transition of the deceased from life to death in which the deceased is definitively separated from the world of the living and incorporated into the world of the ancestors.

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[58] Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death*, 65-6.
[59] Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, 64.

2.2.5 Conclusion

In this section I have described some of the major funeral rituals of the Luo. The rituals are customary practices that are meant to properly conclude a Luo's earthly sojourn and his entry into the world of the living-dead.

The rituals can be simple or exceedingly complex depending on the age, gender, social status of the deceased, the clan's economic and social standing, and religious background. There are prescribed set of rituals that must be performed for every member of the society. I have chosen to describe the ones ordinarily performed for a man to enable me to touch on the full breadth of the major Luo rituals. One would expect to see fewer rituals or ones with minor variations in cases of deaths of elderly women with good standing in the society, unmarried women, unmarried men, and children as I already explained in the introduction.

Three important points emerge out of the present section. First, the customary practices of the Luo are perfectly consistent with what social scientists have observed in humans throughout time, namely that humans develop religious practices in regard to death and afterlife with surprising similarities. Second, the Luo's customary funeral practices reflect their religious or spiritual beliefs that death is more of a journey or transition into another life rather than an end point. Third, Luo funerary rites serve to provide occasions in which the bonds of communion and the sense of community of a society are reinforced. In the funeral rituals we see the Luo's devotion to their ancestors as a significant component of their culture and spirituality. Ultimately the community is re-constituted by the rituals that they perform.

These points have only been hinted at, but not yet fully and explicitly developed in this present section. Since the objective of the ethnographic data contained in this section was meant to provide a detailed, in-depth description of Luo funeral customary practices, I will seek to

analyze and interpret them in the next section. Already the objective of my present section, that of obtaining ethnographic knowledge and description of the Luo funerary practices, belongs to what Clifford Geertz describes as “thick description” of culture, that is, describing both the practices and their contexts as well such that the practices become intelligible to outsiders. Beginning with Geertz, I will next examine the studies of renowned cultural anthropologists and social scientists to enable me to establish conceptual center-points around which I can build a comprehensive analysis of the Luo funeral rituals.

CHAPTER SIX

6.0 LUO FUNERAL RITUALS: COMMUNION OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I attempted to describe who the Luo are. In the second section I described their funeral rituals. In the third and last section of the chapter I will show how their funeral rituals demonstrate the salient features of their communion among themselves, with their deceased members of the society, and with God.

In the present chapter, I will explore the following three important points:

1. The Luo funeral rituals are expressions of the Luo cultural blueprint, attitudes, values, and ideals in response to death and the afterlife.
2. The Luo's customary funeral practices reflect their religious and spiritual beliefs that death is a journey or transition into another life rather than an end in itself.
3. Luo funerary rites serve to provide occasions in which the bonds of communion and the sense of community of a society are reinforced.

I will place these three points within a broader theoretical and methodological framework in order to describe the Luo funeral rituals in greater detail. Indeed, as has been pointed out by many scholars, the cult of ancestors in Africa is perhaps that aspect of the culture to which the African is most attached, the heritage clung to above all else.[1] I will argue in this section

[1] See for example Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African*, tr. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 24-26.

that the Luo funeral rituals reflect the Luos' devotion to their ancestors in a manner that reflects a significant component of their spirituality of communion.

6.1. Hermeneutic conception of Luo culture

Before I can discuss the deeper meaning of Luo cultural practices, I must establish the rational grounds on which to locate the Luo as an independent cultural unit that can be viewed through the established conventional socio-scientific tools. The first task towards a hermeneutic conception of the Luo is to clarify one of the most commonly expressed problems, that of cultural imperialism.

6.1.1 The problem: Against African Symbols of rites and rituals

Dr. B. E. Kipkorir, who worked with the African Inland Mission Church in the western regions of Kenya, reported how in the 1940s, "The missionaries associated the outer symbols of rites and rituals with barbarism and paganism."[2]

Kipkorir's observation is not simply an isolated case of a simple misunderstanding. It is, rather, a prime example of a subjugating strategy found in most mission discourses, one that can be viewed against the backdrop of a wider cultural imperialism—the colonial violence done to indigenous African cultures. Kipkorir himself goes on further to say it was an attitude that characterized how the missionaries viewed the natives and their cultures. He cites the example of a popular missionary and scholar, Leigh Ashton, who made the following damning statements:

> Yet this is the country where these tribes eke out their isolated existence deceived by their father the devil that this is the best that can be experienced in this life and the next. However, their faces told a different story, for as they plodded along the

[2] B. Kipkorir, "Descent From Cherang'any Hills: Memoirs of a Reluctant Academic," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 11, no. 2 (2010): 20.

> mountain paths which passed through the Mission ground, fear and sin were clearly seen reflected in their features, for their lives are steeped in sin, and by the atrocious tribal customs and religious rites they reveal that they are the slaves of the devil, who exacts unmitigated service from them in this life, and pays his full wages at the end - even eternal death.[3]

Kipkorir's observations raise the important question of the historical experience of mission malpractice which is of particular theological and conceptual significance to this study. It is the question about the early missionaries who worked in many parts of Africa and condemned and dismissed Africans' rituals and cultures. The missionaries considered them simply as pagan and barbaric practices before they understood them fully. In fact Kipkorir submits that Ashton's sentiments "epitomized the worst form of the arrogance which confronted traditional African beliefs and cultures."[4]

I shall take up other aspects of the Kipkorir's observations in the next chapter. At this point, Kipkorir's observation serves to illustrate the problem that this section will address: namely, that the Luo funeral symbols of rites and rituals are not merely elements to be associated with barbarism and paganism. To substantiate this statement, I will construct a broad theoretical and methodological framework within which to interpret the Luo funeral rituals. I will argue that the Luo funeral symbols of rites and rituals express the integrated pattern of Luo indigenous knowledge, belief, and behavior. It is through their rituals that we have access to their shared attitudes, values, goals, and their capacity for symbolic thought, social learning, and communion.

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[3] Kipkorir, "Descent From Cherang'any Hills," 20.
[4] Kipkorir, "Descent From Cherang'any Hills," 20.

6.1.2 The centrality of Luo funeral rituals for understanding Luo culture

Anthropologists and sociologists have called attention to the importance of studying rituals in order to understand cultural systems. Such scholars have pointed out the value of rituals in sustaining traditional cultures. Solon T. Kimball, for example, saw rituals not as static entities or "narrowly defined display of magical or religious" precepts but elements that made an important contribution to understanding the unity of rituals and culture.[5] Solon maintained that "the underlying ritual patterns and processes of everyday life and of the unfolding life of the communities are basic to the structure and design of culture itself."[6]

Luo funeral rituals are reflective practices that are rooted in Luo culture. The rituals show the varied ways in which the Luo are engaged in the world. To further explore these rituals and discover their significance for understanding the Luo culture, I will examine them against the works of renowned social scientists and anthropologists to provide me with certain identifiable conceptual standards.

To begin with, I have already indicated in the conclusion of the previous section that the manner in which I described the Luo funeral rituals may be referred to in Geertz's expression as "thick description," a notion that Geertz borrowed from Gilbert Ryle.[7] The reason for that consideration is because Geertz's anthropological approach takes a holistic understanding of

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[5] Cited in Gwenn Kennedy Neville, "Learning Culture Through Ritual: The Family Reunion", *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (2009): 151.

[6] Neville, "Learning Culture Through Ritual", 151.

[7] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*, (New York : Basic Books, 1973), 5-6. "Thick Description" has become an essential concept in the lexicon of qualitative researchers, often applied without precision. Several authors have exposed the challenges in the application of the concept, for example Joseph G. Ponterotto, "Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept Thick Description," *The Qualitative Report* 11, no. 3, (2006): 538-549; Chad Cyrenne, "Is Thick Description Social Science?" *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 3, (2006): 531-540, and Paul Shankman, Attila Ágh et. al., "The Thick and the Thin: On the Interpretive Theoretical Program of Clifford Geertz," *Current Anthropology* 25, no. 3 (1984): 261-280.

culture and explains not just human behavior, but its context as well, which is what I have undertaken in the previous section.

Geertz's approach not only adds quality and depth to this study, but it is also useful in interpreting Luo funeral rituals accurately. It is an approach that offers a basis for a sound understanding of the Luo funeral rituals. Geertz's concept of culture was a product of a careful analysis of eclectic notions of culture that prevailed in his time. His approach incorporated many perspectives; for example, he criticized the approach of his mentor, Clyde Kluckhohn, as an example of the "conceptual morass" which marked Geertz's intellectual environment.[8]

Geertz's analysis led him to embrace the traditions of Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, and Victor Turner.[9] He applied a semiotic concept of culture that had been advanced by Max Weber, whom Geertz credited with the invention of a new interpretative social science.[10] Geertz's often-quoted lines express this clearly:

> Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.[11]

In applying Geertz's insights to my purpose it becomes clearer that the Luo culture is a system of inherited meanings and symbols in which the Luo make sense of their social and religious world. The Luo funeral rituals are the "webs of significance" that the Luo have "spun" to give meaning to their lives.

The definition that Geertz espouses is congruent to these insights. He defines culture as:

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[8] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 4-5.

[9] See example of analytical details in Teresita Majewski and David Gaimster (eds.), *International Handbook of Historical Archaeology* (New York: Springer, 2009), 359-370.

[10] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.

[11] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3-30.

> An historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.[12]

Geertz's definition highlights the important components of the present study. For an accurate hermeneutic conception of the Luo culture, a comprehensive definition that I adopt is one favored by Robert Schreiter. Schreiter begins by acknowledging that "culture" is "a notoriously slippery concept" with no definition that is agreed upon.[13] Schreiter essentially agrees with Geertz and moves further to build on the semiotic definition of culture whereby "both verbal and nonverbal messages are circulated along elaborate, interconnected pathways, which, together, create systems of meaning."[14] Such semiotic definition, according to Schreiter, has three important dimensions. The three dimensions can be summarized thus:

> *Ideational* – [culture] provides systems or frameworks of meaning which serve both to interpret the world and to provide guidance for living in the world.
> *Performance* – rituals that bind cultures' members together to provide them with a participatory way of embodying and enacting their histories and values.
> *Material* – the artifacts and symbolizations that become a source for identity: language, food, clothing, music, and the organization of space.[15]

Indeed, these descriptions apply to the Luo culture and ritual systems. These important dimensions of culture are clearly observable in the Luo funeral rituals. In the rituals we recognize (1) beliefs regarding life in the present time and in the world of the spirits; values such as the sense of communion within the social group and care of the living and the dead; and attitudes especially how the Luo perceive themselves in relation to God and the spirit world (*ideational*); (2) the funeral rituals bind the Luo together providing them with a unified sense of connection to

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[12] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 89.
[13] Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 29.
[14] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 49.
[15] Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 29.

their history and values (*performance*); (3) language, food, music and dance, and ritual space (*material*).

At this point we may ask: are not these sociological interpretative tools constructed within a framework heavily influenced by westernizing assumptions and influences? There is a proliferation of research output from outside the mainstream West that has consistently challenged such westernizing assumptions. Molefi Asante, for example, summarized a view that has been voiced in different ways, namely the "years of solid European domination of intellectual concepts and philosophical ideas [during which] Africa and Asia were subsumed under various headings of the European hierarchy."[16]

To such a question a reasonable response is that although the scholars whose views I consider are part of Western cultural paradigms, they offer valuable starting points for the present study. Furthermore, the broad scope of the present study exceeds the traditional goals of anthropology because it examines Luo culture to arrive at the theological presuppositions within the Luo belief systems.

The dimensions of Luo culture where their theological presuppositions may be located can appear to be numerous and confusing to interpret. Therefore in order to analyze them more accurately, I make distinctions of "practical" and "symbolical" aspects of culture as proposed by J. Gritti. According to Gritti:

> The practical aspects of culture bear on intangible realities: the activities and ways of conduct of social life, ills and techniques, customs, forms of apprenticeship and instruction, etc. In one word: the social "practice." The symbolical aspect indicates all that transmits meaning (be it conscious or unconscious) and representations between the numbers or the generations or a society: rites, traditions, myths, language, etc."[17]

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[16] Molefi Asante, *De-Westernizing Communication: Strategies for Neutralizing Cultural Myths* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011).

[17] J. Gritti, *L'expression de la Foi dans les Cultures Humaines* (Paris: Centurion, 1975), 13.

Can these practical and symbolical dimensions of the Luo rituals interact to convey religious meaning? Geertz is only providing a broad framework on which to examine "Religion as a Cultural System."[18] Nevertheless, Geertz is relevant to our inquiry because of his rejection of static functionalism in favor of a more dynamic approach in his study of "Ritual and Social Change."[19] Geertz's preference for a more dynamic approach helps us to take into account the symbolic cultural forms of Luo funeral rituals as well as how these rituals blend in with the general Luo social structure.

Turner focuses more on our question of religious meaning in Luo cultural practices. Turner defines culture as a "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers."[20] Indeed, this is what we observed in Luo funeral rituals: each funeral participant performed a certain ritual according to the community's understanding of how the ritual links the living with the world of the spirits.

The Luo respond in structured and patterned ways when death strikes. Such structures and patterns in response to death and funeral rites have been examined from different viewpoints, as evidenced by the abundant literature of the discipline.[21]

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[18] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 87-8.

[19] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 142-149.

[20] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 19.

[21] Relevant introductory materials can be obtained from Clifton D. Bryant and Dennis L. Peck, eds., *Encyclopedia of death & the human experience* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009); Kroeber, "Disposal of the Dead," *American Anthropologist* 29, no. 3, (1927): 308-315; Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991; François Macé, *La Mort et les Funérailles dans le Japon Ancient*, (Paris: Publications Orientalistes de France, 1986); E. Bendann, *Death customs: An Analytical Study of Burial Rites*, (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1990); Max Gluckman, "Mortuary Customs and the Belief in the Survival After Death Among South Eastern Bantu," *Bantu Studies* 11, (1937): 117-136.

The analysis of Luo mortuary practices therefore provides us with rich data on the behavior of the Luo. It gives us access to their belief and value systems, to their conceptions of the social and moral worlds. We get to know that funeral rituals have consequences for both the individual and society. In these mortuary practices we see the Luo's notions of God, the value of the human person, spirits, and afterworlds.

Abundant literature describes the specific cultural guidelines that determine the treatment and disposal of the body of the deceased. The literature also describes the behavior of every funeral participant, as the participants follow a very definite cultural blueprint of values, ideals, and attitudes, which are passed down from one generation to the next. The Luo mortuary customs impose on the funeral participants certain modes of behavior as well as the simulation of certain emotions which may or may not be felt, as described in the individual and community ways of public mourning. The performance of these rituals, according to Gluckman, emphasizes the society's social dimension and the importance of supernatural sanction in enforcing conformity.[22]

6.2. Luo Funeral rituals: Death as a passage

The historians of religion Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell and anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Victor Turner are examples of scholars whose works bear certain commonalities or presuppositions in regard to the "rites of passage."[23]

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[22] Gluckman, *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations* (Manchester University Press, 1966), 24.

[23] Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. from the French by Claire Jacobson et. al., (New York: Basic Books, 1963-1976).

These authors consistently demonstrate the widespread patterns of ritual behaviors of individuals and communities in coping with growth and change. They acknowledge that each society has mechanisms by which growth and change are directed and traumatizing or threatening experiences are confronted.

"Rite of passage" is often used to refer to diverse situations in which societies incorporate change without disrupting the equilibrium necessary to their social order.[24] The expression is closely linked to Van Gennep, who may have initiated the structural-functional perspective which has long dominated analyses and interpretations of mortuary rites.[25] His anthropological theories and those of Turner bear more relevance to this study.[26]

Van Gennep's study, *Les Rites de Passage*, first published in 1909, formed the backdrop to most anthropological works since then. He began his observations from general laws of social process that he believed ought to come from empirical observations rather than from metaphysical speculations. He distinguished three major phases of "rites of passage" as *separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation*.[27]

I borrow Van Gennep's social theory to help interpret the entire Luo funeral ritual practices as "passage" from the painful experience of death to a state of peace and normalcy. I will highlight the patterns of behavior and customs that the Luo engage in during the period of mourning and post-funeral adjustments that warrant such borrowing. A typical Luo funeral

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[24] "Rites of passage" usually refers to particular times when individuals transition (often not without difficulty) from one phase of life to a new or more mature phase. These times can be chronological, including transition from childhood to adolescence, adolescence to adulthood, adult working years to retirement, and so on. Rites of passage are also event-related: a child leaving home for a boarding school or military service, a young person getting a first job, marriage and establishing a home as a married couple, separation or divorce, parents experiencing the "empty nest" when children move out of the home, adjusting to widowhood, or selling/moving from one's homestead to a retirement or assisted living facility, etc.

[25] Adjaye, *Boundaries of Self and Other in Ghanaian Popular Culture*, 139.

[26] See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, (Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1966).

[27] Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 1-14.

stretches over a long period of time, usually a year, as we saw in the previous section. Those rites can be viewed as having a tripartite dramaturgical structure that corresponds with Van Gennep's ritual theory.

Numerous authors can be cited who have argued that the ritual theory of passage which was initially developed as a means to analyze the middle stage in ritual passages can be expanded beyond that scope. Bjørn Thomassen, for example, says that the theory is "now considered by some to be a master concept in the social and political sciences writ large."[28] In the introduction to the English translation of Van Gennep's study, Kimball adds credibility to this approach when he maintains that Van Gennep's central concept for understanding the "transitional" stage applies to an individual as well as a group.[29] Rosemary Brana-Shuter and Gary Brana-Shuter are even more on point in their religious and cultural study of Creole customs. The two write that "funerary rituals are intended to aid the passage of both the living and the dead."[30] I build on these observations and argue that Van Gennep's concept can serve as an appropriate metaphor for interpreting two simultaneous "passages" in a Luo funeral: those of the funeral participants and those of the deceased. In order to analyze these two distinct dynamic processes clearly I will treat them separately.

6.2.1 The "passage" of the funeral participants

The dynamic of "passage" happens to a community of mourners who journey through the sadness and gloom that mark funeral rituals into the regular life of the society. This paradigm has

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[28] Bjørn Thomassen, "The Uses and Meanings of Liminality," *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1, (2009): 51.

[29] Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, viii.

[30] Rosemary Brana-Shute and Gary Brana-Shuter, "Death in the Family: Ritual Therapy in a Creole Community," *Anthropologica* 21, (1979): 61.

been adopted also by Blumenkrantz and Goldstein, who argued that the rite of passage process not only guides the individual's transition to a new status, but, equally important, creates public events that celebrate certain important aspects of the community itself.[31] The community is at the center of the celebrations as it tries to deal with the overwhelming feelings of loss and despair. The values, the two authors submit, inform and guide expectations for behaviors essential for the community's survival.[32]

The ritual subjects are *separated* from the rest of the society from the moment the *Muocho yuak* ritual is sounded. *Muocho yuak* opens a ritual space (or a space of spiritual or social power) that can be distinguished from the ordinary social experiences of the community. The mysterious presence of the corpse transforms the raw ordinary space into a ritual space that summons the engagement of the community.

That separation is followed by the rites performed within the *transition* phase, also known as *marginality* (since the ritual performers are placed in between two different existential planes), that I will describe below. The transition phase is also known as *liminality*.[33]

Building on Van Gennep's idea of the processual structure of rituals, Turner in his "Liminality and Communitas" describes the funeral participants as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony."[34] A Luo funeral lies "betwixt and between" two periods of social time, namely, the

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[31] D. G. Blumenkrantz, and M. B. Goldstein, "Rites of passage as a framework for community interventions with youth" *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice* 1 no. 2, (2010): 41-50.

[32] Blumenkrantz and Goldstein, "Rites of passage as a framework", 50.

[33] Liminality is derived from Latin *līmen* which means "a threshold". The *Oxford English Dictionary* has an entry of "liminal" which means "Of or pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process."

[34] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 95. It is important to keep in mind that Turner in his *Schism and Continuity* distinguished between "rituals of crisis" and "rituals of affliction" from his study of Ndembu rituals. I shall examine the relevance of these insights in coming chapters of this study.

time before and after the death of an individual member of the community. The funeral rituals heighten the contrast between these two periods in the life of the community.

Turner's insight reflects directly on the experience of Luo funeral participants. They interact in a recognizable ritual space which, although not geographically marked out, is nevertheless characterized by a relational bond. As a people, they are aware of their unity of purpose in carrying out these supernaturally and communally sanctioned rituals. Such relationships, according to Turner, constitute "two major 'models' for human interrelatedness" that are formed as a result of ritual performance.[35] The first model is of the "society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system." This is observed in the assemblage of kin, friends, and neighbors coming to the funeral.

> The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.[36]

The second model is easily recognizable in a Luo funeral setting. Ritual subjects are usually characterized by their spontaneity and a collective ritual experience which Turner himself referred to as "communitas"[37] (which I will describe below).

The rituals that the community performs during the transition period include mourning, playing musical instruments, singing, dancing, and eating. These activities lead to unity and

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[35] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 96.

[36] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 96.

[37] Turner acknowledged borrowing "communitas" from Paul Goodman, although Turner used it differently from Goodman, highlighting its prime anti-structural characteristic. Goodman had used it as a theoretical tool to examine three possible kinds of societies centered around (1) consumption, (2) artistic and creative pursuits, and (3) one which maximizes human liberty. See Tim Olaveson, "Collective Effervescence and Communitas: Processual Models of Ritual and Society in Emile Durkheim and Victor Turner" in *Dialectical Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (2001): 89-124. Interestingly Turner went along with Goodman's triad and identified three types of communitas: spontaneous, ideological, and normative communitas. See Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, N.Y.: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 49-50.

stability of the community that become visible at the end of the funeral rituals. The re-integration of the community, as I will show, is marked by social values such as fraternity, togetherness, and deeper relationships. The rituals at the various stages of the funeral are therefore geared toward the end of reaffirming those community values, informing and guiding expectations for performance that are essential for the society's well-being.

6.2.3 Fear-driven patterns during "passage"

There is a pattern of fear during the "passage" of the community that comes from a perceived pollution and danger and which ought to be recognized. During the transition period, the community performs several rituals that, although occasioned by the death of one of its members, are primarily important for its survival. Having identified *chira* as one of the forces that cause ritual subjects to perform certain rituals or to enforce certain prohibitions, can we add evil spirits to the list?

The answer must be "yes." As we saw in *tero buru*, dances and songs are meant to counteract the potential effects of lingering evil spirits. Paul Hockings points out that "Evil spirits are the embodiment of ambiguity, for they. . . need to be thwarted to protect the social stability by ambiguous performances. Thus we see. . . men and women dancing energetically."[38] No study has been done on the complexity of emotions to be found in Luo funeral settings, such as grief, uncertainty, anger, and fear. Such study could become very useful in demonstrating the extent to which such emotions affect the ritual subjects' belief and ritual performance.

But even in the absence of such studies, one readily notices the dialectical tension of fear and attraction in the Luo attitude towards funeral rituals. This attitude, as I shall describe below,

[38] Paul Hockings, "Visual Aspects of Ritual Behavior: The Funeral, for Instance," *Visual Anthropology* 23 (2010): 175.

also becomes reflected in the Luo's ambivalent behavior characterized by fear of and attraction towards ancestors. The almost palpable fear that is connected to death and funeral rites threatens the unity and stability of the Luo society during the transition period. It is a fear that is linked to the deceased and the deceased's relationship to the surroundings and the chief mourners who come into contact with the deceased. Mary Douglas confirms this insight in her study *Purity and Danger*. Douglas observes that liminal individuals are dangerous to the rest of the society and "all precaution of danger must come from the rest" of the society who are not in the ritual space.[39]

Turner seems to go beyond Douglas's observations by explaining the reasons for which the liminal individuals are dangerous. According to Turner, the liminal individuals have "no status, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows."[40] Turner essentially points out the danger of the liminal individuals, but perhaps they are more descriptive of the Ndembu people that they originally described than the Luo. If the liminal individuals are completely stripped of social identity as members of the society, as Turner says, the apparent overemphasis removes them from the society entirely. Actually, Turner seems to have corrected himself when he later clarified that marginality ought not be confused with genuine *outsiderhood* which, he wrote, consists of "shamans, diviners, medium, priests, those in monastic seclusion, hippies, hoboes, and gypsies."[41]

The consequent application of pollution and danger to all who enter into the funeral ritual space or come into close contact with the deceased or his belongings is a very important

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[39] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1966), 121.

[40] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 98.

[41] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), 233.

consideration for a Luo. For that reason certain purification procedures are deemed important: the body of the deceased is carefully washed; the implements used for digging the grave are thoroughly cleaned; and the cleansing rites, particularly the prescribed ceremonial shaving of the chief mourners are carefully observed.

All rituals must be performed without failure or interruption to ensure the individual and communal reintegration. The personal psychological and physical well-being and that of the society are substantially hinged on rituals, especially those of purification. In other words, liminal individuals will remain dangerous to themselves and the rest of the society until they perform the prescribed rites that re-integrate them into the larger society. Remaining in the liminal state may result in or mean an irrevocable abdication or disconnection from the larger community.

In the reintegration stage, the mourners come to the end of the funeral rites. The final celebration marks the official end of the funeral rites. It summons the relatives and friends of the deceased at his or her tomb about a year after burial. *Duogo e liel* as I have described above, is traditionally a great celebration marked by an abundance of food and dance. The societal values that are emphasized at the conclusion of the funeral rituals include community life, good human relations, hospitality, sacredness of life, and sacredness of religion. The community also reaffirms its essential values such as respect for authority and the elders. These values embody the Luos' hopes, dreams, and aspirations for individual and communal integration.

At this stage of integration, the society returns to the state of normalcy. It is a very important stage in the ritual process, as I will describe below. When the funeral participants become re-incorporated into the larger society, they emerge as new members of the society, having been transformed by the experience of death and the performance of rituals.

6.2.4 Death as a "passage" of the deceased

When a Luo has withdrawn from the active life of the community because of ill health, the community intuitively perceives that he or she is gradually moving ever closer to a sacred sphere and eventually to death. The place where the sick person lies is approached with silence and religious awe. This is because the community naturally offers its sympathy for the dying person's bodily pains, and at the same time recognizes the sacredness of the moment.

As soon as a seriously ill person is pronounced dead, the status of that individual in the perception of the community changes immediately. We can apply Van Gennep's three-phase structure of *separation*, *transition*, and *aggregation* to the deceased to describe the society's perception of the changes that the deceased goes through from that point on.

However, the sequence in which the rituals are performed does not always take a linear pattern that conforms to Van Gennep's ritual theory. The rituals may overlap and even interpenetrate each other. Thus, removing the body from where it lies inside the house to a designated place outside of the house may be considered as *separation*. The same movement from the house simultaneously signifies the *transition* to the spirit world.

When death strikes, the living community becomes sharply aware that the deceased has been (in Van Gennep's ritual theory) *separated* from the community. The initial rituals of *muocho yuak* and *yuak* especially express the mourners' understanding that the individual has been removed or separated from the community's regular social life. That separation has dissolved existing regular social ties and status. The community no longer views the deceased person as its regular member as it used to. Even though the personal ties of relationship and or friendship may exist and the deceased may be addressed as if still living, the ties are to be

gradually discouraged, so that as time goes by no community member can say to the deceased, however loved he or she may be: "Come and sit here beside me while we wait for dinner."[42] Nevertheless, the deceased always remains an organic part of the community. That is why Mbiti can confidently say: "People view death paradoxically: it is a separation but not annihilation, the dead person is suddenly cut off from the human society and yet the corporate group clings to him."[43]

The words that the Luo use to refer to death and the separation of their member require our close attention. The deceased is referred to as *tipo* (shadow) and *chuny* (heart or soul).[44] I already mentioned "*owewa*" (he/she has left us) as one of the ways that a Luo may casually speak about the deceased and death. There are many other ways to refer to a person's actual death, including "has slept, "kicked the basket,"' "soul has terminated," "has passed on," and so forth. All these popular expressions deliberately avoid the gruesomeness and finality of death and instead refer to death as a passage. These expressions reveal the Luo belief that death is not annihilation or cessation of life. This belief is one of the pillars on which African traditional religions rest. Many scholars who articulate African traditional beliefs will unanimously agree that African people hold a holistic view of life which places a rather thin line, if any, between "life" and "death."[45]

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[42] C.f. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 84.

[43] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi, Kampala, Dar-es-Salaam: East African Educational Publishers, 1969), 159.

[44] See Ogot, "On the Making of a Sanctuary: Being Some Thoughts on the History of Religion in Padhola," in *The Historical Study of African Religion*, T. O. Ranger and I. N. Kimambo (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 124 and Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World* 170-1, 212-3. *Chuny* is a more popular designation. Masolo points out correctly that *chuny* has gained wider currency because of its closeness to the Western Christian idea of "soul" which as St. Thomas described is the non-material substance that survives corruption at death. Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World*, 213.

[45] Douglas E. Thomas, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World* (London: Mc Farland & Company, Inc; Publisher, 2005), 80.

The deceased “leaves” the community, but at the same time never actually “leaves.” The separation places the deceased into an intermediate period in which he or she belongs neither to the living community nor to the ancestors, a period that we already described in the words of Mbiti as “living-dead.”

The status of the deceased, the liminal “individual,” is socially and structurally ambiguous. The deceased is on the "threshold" of or between two different existential planes, that is, of the living and of the dead. Turner's “betwixt and between” describes the status of the deceased well.[46] The “hereafter” of the Luo is not clearly articulated in words but demonstrated through rites. Most of the persons I interviewed sounded vague about the destination of the deceased. A good number responded by saying the deceased has joined the ancestors. Others were uncertain and preferred to articulate the more modern Christian understanding of heaven: “*odhi e polo*” (he/she has gone to heaven.) The more traditionally inclined and knowledgeable informants, however, responded that the deceased has gone “to the invisible world which is here with us.” Mbiti articulates this traditional position well: “The next world is in fact geographically ‘here’, being separated from this only by virtue of being invisible to human beings.”[47]

If the Luo’s hereafter is in fact geographically “here” then it is imperative that he or she becomes attentive and sensitive to the Luo universe that is comprised of the visible (inhabited by human beings and all other beings) and the invisible (inhabited by the spirits and other spiritual beings). This reasoning also becomes manifest in the Luo claim that any casual observer perceives, namely, that truth is not confined only to that which is empirically testable. The truth about the living-dead, for example, is a spiritual truth that belongs to the realm of faith. Moreover, the Luo’s natural impulse for gregariousness comes from his or her understanding that

[46] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 93-111.
[47] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 159.

the entire world is in a communion that is comprised of the living-dead, the living, and the unborn.

The deceased is en route to the company of other deceased members of the society loosely referred to as ancestors. In the Luo religious world view, then, to die is to depart the world of the living and to enter into the world of the ancestors. Many African authors have noted that this entry is accomplished over a long period of time: "The process of becoming an ancestor begins at death . . . [Death] does not end or annihilate human life, but rather, is regarded as an inevitable passage to the next stage of life."[48]

6.2.5 The Luo hereafter situated in time and space

The *entry* into the world of ancestors is contingent upon our understanding of the Luo perception of personal immortality and space-time continuum. According to Mbiti, there is no concept of the future in the African traditional worldview.[49] For my purpose it would be simplistic to deduce solely from Mbiti's claims that the Luo have no concept of the future. Of course they do. A brief analysis of this claim is in order at this point.

Kwasi Wiredu has correctly described Mbiti's third chapter, "The Concept of Time," in (Mbiti's) *African Religions and Philosophy* as "philosophically the most interesting chapter of

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[48] Jacob K. Olupona, "Sacred Cosmos: An Ethnography of African Indigenous Religious Traditions" in *African Americans and The Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush, (New York, London: Continuum, 2000), 171. I will provide more details in regard to the status of an African ancestor in the next chapter.

[49] Mbiti's contribution has generated a lot of lively debates over time. Some leading studies on Mbiti's work include Kibujjo M. Kalumba, "A New Analysis of Mbiti's 'The Concept of Time,'" *Philosophia Africana* 8, no. 1, (March, 2005): 11-20 and Parker English, "Kalumbda, Mbiti, and a Traditional African Concept of Time," *Philosophia Africana* 9, no.1, (2006): 53-66. William P. Russel, "Time Also Moves Backwards: John Mbiti's Traditional Concept of Time and the Future of World Christianity," *Studies in World Christianity* 9, no. 1, (2003):88-102. Credits must, however, go to Dominique Zahan who discussed the African concept of time before Mbiti did. The two authors worked independently and surprisingly arrived at similar conclusions. Zahan wrote, for example, that "For the African, time is not conceivable except by referring to the generation on which it rests." Dominique Zahan, *Religion, Spiritualité et Pensée Africaines*, 2nd edition, (Paris: Payot, 1970), 75-6.

the book." [50] However, "interesting" is not necessarily correct or acceptable. Mbiti rejects the "Western concept" of time that he says consists of a three-dimensional view, namely, an indefinite past, a present, and an infinite future. Mbiti considers this view as alien to traditional African thought. In its place he proposes a two-dimensional view comprising of "Sasa" (Swahili for "present") and "Zamani" (Swahili for "past"). Mbiti's view seems to be too vague and inadequate to accurately express the Luo understanding of time. According to the famous Luo philosopher Odera Oruka, the Luo have an indefinite past (*chon*), a present (*tinde*), and an infinite future (*gi ma nobi*).[51] These are the very concepts that Mbiti rejected.

Furthermore, according to Mbiti, death is a process which gradually removes a person from the present to the past. Mbiti's explanation of the manner in which the past weaves into the present and dovetails with the future is arbitrary and hard to apply concretely to the Luo concept of time. Mbiti argues in his ontological thesis that for traditional Africans, time is nothing but a composition of events. Oruka explains that the Luo psychological method (as opposed to the modern mechanical method) of reckoning time events was used as paradigms that were located in definite time-period blocks to approximate occurrences.[52] It is therefore theoretically possible to speak about life after death against the backdrop of an infinite future as expressed in the Luo ritual economy.

In the rite of *tero buru* I have already highlighted Shipton's words that "*when* blood sprinkles or drops *on the ground*, the ancestors are already there waiting to receive it." (Italics are mine for emphasis.) Shipton's insightful example is timely. There is a striking specificity and

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[50] Kwasi Wiredu, "On Defining African Philosophy," in Tsenay Serequeberhan (ed.), *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 90. See Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 15-28.

[51] Paul Mbuya Akoko, "An Interview with Odera Oruka" in *I am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy*, eds. Fred Lee Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1995), 32-33.

[52] Akoko, "An Interview with Odera Oruka", 32.

intentionality in the blood libation. It falls at a specific time (*when*) *on the ground*. At the point of contact between human libation and earth, the Luo say "*lowo oloko yamo*" (the ground [in which one is buried] has turned [the deceased] into wind). The superhuman exchange celebrates the reception of *chuny* in the world of spirits. The world of the spirits recognizes the world of the mortals. The fusion of the two worlds creates a new time and space for *chuny*. This development is etched into the memory of the living human community. According to a number of African scholars, it is this memory that constitutes personal immortality.[53]

It should be borne in mind that the Luo understanding of surviving death is not identical with the Christian concept of immortality, nor is immortality identical with a continuation of personality or individuality. This we can see clearly in Mbiti's view that continuation of life after death for African peoples

> . . . does not constitute a hope for a future and better life. To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs…. Even life in the hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter.[54]

As Mbiti points out, the hereafter for the Luo is not better than the physical present world. Moreover, the Luo does not look forward to the resurrection as taught in Judeo-Christian faith. The Luo does not hope that his or her life will progress into a future bliss in which the wrongs of the past are rectified. The Luo's hope in the hereafter consists in identifying with the past and attaining unity with past generations.

The rite of burial is the final symbolism of separation. It publicly and clearly marks the end of a Luo's material life and beginning of the hereafter. The Luo grave is the physical and symbolic entrance to the afterlife. It explains in part why the Luo cling steadfastly to their burial

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[53] See especially Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 25 and Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World*, 171.

[54] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 4-5.

customs and insistence that a Luo must be buried at their *homes* as opposed to their *houses* (for example, as we saw S. M. Otieno owned a *house* near the city of Nairobi but it was not considered as a *home* by his clan in the Luo country).

The separation and transition of the deceased is marked by a series of reintegration rites symbolized especially by sharing food. The final feasting during which the funeral participants formally mark the end of funeral rituals brings the community together in the keen awareness of their union with the deceased. Thus, for the Luo death is not something final, but rather the condition *sine qua non* of a transition to another mode of being. Death is indispensable to regeneration of an individual and the community.

To summarize the Luo understanding of the passage of *chuny* from the physical into the spiritual world of the spirits, we see that social morphology influences their funeral rituals and their belief in immortality. Their inchoate ideas in regard to reckoning time and about the existence of *chuny* beyond death are contained in the repertoire of mortuary customs. These customs serve as a means of maintaining links with the deceased, kinship groupings, and the spirit world including *Nyasaye*.

6.3 Funeral rituals reconstitute a Luo community: Communitas and re-integration

6.3.1 Elements of communitas in Luo funeral rituals

In this last section of the chapter I will concentrate mainly on the second and last stages of passage: liminality (communitas) and reintegration. Turner's and Durkheim's ritual theories are particularly helpful conceptual tools for this purpose. Although Olaveson makes an important

note of Turner's concept of communitas and Durkheim's concept of "collective effervescence" as in fact analogous constructs, Turner's concept is more relevant.[55]

I will do this through the lens of Turner's theory of communitas.[56] In Turner's first essay of processual form of ritual he noted that by treating ritual subjects equally (without distinctions) in the liminal phase, the ritual subjects constitute "a community or commity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions."[57]

Turner speaks to the Luo situation. Funeral participants come from a vast variety of professions and social strata. As soon as they enter the funeral ritual space they simply become mourners. They are of amorphous and faceless individuals united in grief: no rich or poor, young or old or other categories. The only exception that naturally blends into the ritual space is the chief mourners: those men and women who are closest to the deceased and who have certain responsibilities by virtue of their nearness to the mystery of death. The *structure* of the lives of the entire ritual subjects is set aside and communitas among the mourners is achieved. Their regular life of the immediate past is disrupted or overturned by death.

The Luo funeral subjects form a communitas when the announcement of death causes disorganized emotional experiences, ushering in a series of normative performances, and ideological construction converges to create and maintain a dynamic network of

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[55] Olaveson, "Collective Effervescence and Communitas," 90. Granted that the Luo funeral celebrations bring with them an effervescence that characterizes a typical funeral as a special time, that "effervescence" is not experienced continuously through the entire time of the funeral. For that reason I am more inclined to apply Turner's conceptual tool of communitas because it only states that there are temporary sets of relationships within the funeral contexts that are based on shared ritual experiences and that transform the community from its drab everyday character into a festive one.

[56] My preference for Turner's conceptual tool is mainly based on the fact that he represents a long anthropological tradition that better reflects the Luo cultural traits. That tradition stretches from Durkheim to the functionalists and structural functionalist theorists who were influenced by Durkheim such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Talcot-Parsons, and Max Gluckman. Turner was a student of Gluckman whose lineage can be traced back to Durkheim.

[57] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 100.

interdependencies.[58] Since communitas is essentially "antistructure" (Turner's terminology), the series of performances creates and maintains the sense of connection among the community members. The coming together of the community in response to death causes new "structures" to begin to emerge, that is, cohesion of the community. As members interact with each other, they revive a sense of connection to the community.

From the moment of *muocho yuak*, the spirit of communitas suffuses through all aspects of the funeral events. Family and friends enter into the funeral ritual space without any particular order. There is a collective ego-loss and unity of purpose that dissolves all social boundaries. They come with an overwhelming desire to deal with the painful experience of death. Mourning is performed individually and collectively in a communal setting. Liminal subjects process individual and collective stress. Luo funeral rituals encourage emotional and experiential engagement that ensures that an instinctual need for release is not suppressed. The need for release is very universal. In the previous chapter I noted how the early Christians also exhibited violent grief and spontaneous lamentations at their funerals. It took the intervention of Christian teachers such as Basil and John Chrysostom to control the spontaneous practices of the grieving society. Indeed as Andrzej Szczeklik has rightly pointed out from a medical perspective applicable to the Luo, mourning includes cathartic activities such as crying, weeping, drumming, or ecstatic dance.[59]

An important observation that has largely been left out of anthropological considerations and perspectives and that must be paid attention to in the light of the anti-structurality that characterizes Luo communitas concerns the two modes of expression of self: Apollonian and

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[58] For a more comprehensive treatment of this point, see Ludim R. Pedroza, "Music as *Communitas*: Franz Liszt, Clara Schumann, and the Musical Work," *Journal of Musicological Research* 29 (2010): 295.

[59] Andrzej Szczeklik, *Catharsis: On the Art of Medicine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 55-69.

Dionysian styles of expression. The Luo mode of cultural expression may be said to be Dionysian, that is, it is loose, exuberant, imprecise, spontaneous, flamboyant, wild, a "let it all hang out" semi-controlled, happy style. In contrast, the Apollonian style is organized, dignified, controlled, predictable, precise, calculated and decent. (These styles will become clearer below.)

During *budho* ritual, participants interact freely with each other and discuss issues that otherwise would not be discussed in ordinary settings. When night falls and things quiet down, participants gather around *magenga*, discussions usually go beyond matters related to the funeral. New arrivals usually view the body and exchange pleasantries with the funeral attendees who arrived earlier. The new arrivals then join the small or large groups of mourners where they bond and freely express their fears, grievances, disappointments and much more. Turner himself observes that funeral occasions provide excellent opportunities for "dissolution of distance."[60] Moreover, funeral participants usually have to make many funeral decisions in regard to funds, time, and labor in order to carry out the required rituals. These activities cause a special relationship of connectedness to develop.

Stronger sentiments of belonging together are manifested at the time of the compelling and evocative performance of *tero buru*. When the *buru* party returns from the fields, the funeral rites reach their fever pitch. There is a strong sense of community, abandonment, and transcendence as ritual participants' powerful emotions coalesce to cause ritual transformation. In the communitas at this point of the funeral, there is a reinforcement of community values and dissolution of social structures.

There are the individual or private performances in the rituals such as *liedo*, *tero chola*, and *keyo nyinyo*. While these rituals may appear to be disparate, they heighten the ritual subjects'

[60] Turner, *Blazing the Trail: Way Marks in the Exploration of Symbols* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 31.

ceremonial engagement. They are not simply random acts of sorrowing villagers. Raymond Firth has analyzed the theoretical framework in indigenous rituals that emphasized the "choice, decision, organization and process" that went into such collective performances.[61] These rituals fit within the larger funeral framework where a "generalized social bond" [62] forms a sense of communitas.

A Luo funeral setting is therefore a ritual moment that allows for the inversion of the rules of ordinary social life. The resulting communitas created a heightened awareness of what is most essential in everyday hierarchical life, while simultaneously providing a glimpse of Luo cultural ideals of community and cooperation. Moreover, they promote trust and cooperation which lead to solidarity among the ritual subjects.

6.3.2 Communitas promotes the solidarity of the community

One of the wide-ranging implications of Luo funeral rituals is the promotion of solidarity among the ritual subjects. A number of functionalist scholars have explored how ritual sustains the social order within a community and builds integration and cohesion. Among these scholars Durkheim's pioneering study for organization of society is especially relevant.

Durkheim distinguished between "mechanical" and "organic solidarity" as part of his theory of the development of societies.[63] By mechanical solidarity he identified the solidarity that operates in traditional and small scale societies when people feel connected through similar

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[61] Karen Ann Watson-Gegeo, "Raymond Firth" in Christopher Winters (ed.), *International Dictionary of Anthropologists* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991), 198.

[62] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 90.

[63] Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1997, 1984), ch. 2 and 3. This book is based on the author's doctoral thesis of 1893, originally translated from *De la Division du Travail Social* and published by Macmillan in 1933.

performance.[64] By organic solidarity he identified the social cohesion based upon the interdependence of individual members of the society on each other to perform their specified tasks.[65]

In the Luo communitas, there are both elements of mechanical and organic solidarity. The funeral rituals allow for the performative expression of the fundamental values of cooperation and the common good of the society. The ritual subjects perform the rituals in an interactive environment and feel connected through the rituals. This first form of solidarity leads to the second form: a social cohesion based upon their interdependence in performing the various funeral tasks.

Some scholars have attempted to study how rituals facilitate group solidarity. Rappaport, for example, has examined Durkheim's analysis of group solidarity for a more precise effect of ritual as a consequence of ritual's communicative abilities.[66] Rappaport argued that since rituals indicate the "accurate intentions" of their performers, they promote trust and cooperation within communities. Rappaport's insight of promotion of trust and cooperation applies to the Luo but is exaggerated in regard to their intentions. Rappaport seems to be confusing uniformity with conformity. Moreover, it is theoretically difficult to establish a reliable behavioral paradigm influenced by the scientific methodology that accurately measures and evaluates the ritual subjects' beliefs as cultural. What one can say for certain is that the Luo funeral rituals that form communitas are forms of expressions through which solidarity is revivified and sustained.

To be more specific, Radcliffe-Brown suggests two factors that enhance the solidarity of the community, and here he is more relevant than Rappaport: the social and psychological

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[64] Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, 32-63.
[65] Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, 69-83.
[66] Roy Rappaport, "The obvious aspects of ritual," in *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*, Roy Rappaport (Richmond, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1979), 173-221.

functions of behavior in the performance of the funeral rituals.[67] The two factors apply readily to the Luo because they combine at different times of the ritual subjects' interaction. These two factors affect the network of social relations of the community and bind the community in an orderly fashion.

Nevertheless, Durkheim's conceptual distinctions provide a theoretical framework within which we can identify the "social structural context which contains mainly shared symbolic systems, knowledge, and sentiments, and those in which there is greater division of labor, specialization, interdependence, and diversity."[68] Distinctions are blurred as communitas undercuts the enacted diversity of the ritual subjects to promote solidarity.

6.3.3 Solidarity facilitates communion

There is interplay between communitas (manifested in the solidarity of the ritual subjects) and structure (reflected in the communion in the society) throughout the Luo funeral rituals that become evident as the funeral progresses. For example, there is the outpouring of emotions and spontaneous and disorganized acts of mourning expressed at the funeral, especially before burial. At the same time there are organized rituals that require collective actions, such as burial, processions, singing and dancing in groups, shaving, and sharing meals.

In the communitas, the rules of normal social order are suspended. These moments of suspensions give rise to a unique flowering of solidarity, unity, and stability of the group. Indeed,

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[67] Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses* (New York: Free Press, 1968, 1952), 186.

[68] John Goodger, "Ritual Solidarity and Sport," *Acta Sociologica* 29, no. 3, (1986): 221.

as Edith Turner explains, "After the inception of spontaneous communitas a structuring process often develops and a cycle of communitas/structure/communitas ensues."[69]

The cycle of the Luo economy of funeral rituals comes to a stop with the final meal that officially marks the end of the mourning period and of the performance of all funeral rituals. The final meal is a moment of reintegration that completes Van Gennep's ritual theory. In this final celebration (*duogo e liel*), the ritual subjects celebrate their most fundamental and societal attributes as members of a given ancestry. The final feast with its central idea of double liberation of mourners and of the deceased seems to be a universal phenomenon. Three examples can be cited. First, Robert Hertz, who published his *L'anée Sociologique* in 1907, two years before Van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage*, writes about final ceremonies from his studies of Australian and Indonesian cultures. Hertz writes:

> When we compare the final ceremony as it is found among central Australians with the Indonesian funeral feast, we cannot but be struck by the similarity that exists. . . Not only is it always a matter of bringing to an end the mourning of the close relatives, but the end pursued is identical as far as the deceased himself is concerned. . . . The reunion of the dead with their ancestors occurs here."[70]

Second, Huntington and Metcalf write about the "great feast" that terminates the miserable period of mourning. The two authors draw from a wide variety of examples from different continents and epochs, including the great tombs of the Berawan of Borneo, the pyramids of Egypt, the dramas of medieval French royal funerals, the burial practices of the Dinka of Sudan, and other funeral rituals from around the world. They say that the feast confirms the soul's arrival in the land of ancestors and "marks the reestablishment of normal relations of the

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[69] Edith Turner, "Rites of Communitas" in *Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals, and Festivals*, ed. Frank A. Salamone (New York, London: Routledge, 2004), 98.

[70] Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, 69.

survivors."[71] Third, Manjula Poyil studied some thirty-six different "tribal" communities who inhabit the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. Poyil concludes that the feast is a universal practice in which "only after performing this rite can the soul of the dead person acquire lasting peace and only then can death pollution come to an end."[72]

Among the Luo, when the community has accumulated sufficient funds to organize and host the final feast, usually a year after the person's death, the rite whose purpose resembles the three examples above is performed. The Luo perform the final feast (1) to bring a closure to the funeral rituals; (2) to terminate the period of sadness and gloom that marked the community following the death; (3) to confirm the deceased's arrival in the land of the ancestors; (4) to formally mark the re-establishment of normal relations in the community.

The Luo final feast is performed in a joyful, celebratory mood. The ritual subjects exhibit structural features, symbolic motifs and performance patterns that are congruent with the Luo values and virtues. The instruments of solidarity that I discussed above facilitate the reintegration of the social network of survivors. Furthermore, they integrate the world of the ritual subjects and that of the dead.

Indeed, as many authors have expressed, the Luo funerary rituals, the most explicit and pervasive traditional ritual practices, connect people "to other living things, to material objects and to the ancestors."[73] Ruth Prince argues that practices of *riwo* (uniting or bringing together) cause the substantial bonds between persons to emerge.[74] In those bonds that are formed, we find

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[71] Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Rituals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 14.

[72] Manjula Poyil, "Farewell Ritual and Transmigrating Souls: Secondary Funeral of the Attappadi Kurumbas," *Anthropologist* 11, no. 1 (2009): 31.

[73] Ruth Prince, "Salvation and Tradition: Configurations of Faith in a Time of Death," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37 (2007): 84-115.

[74] Prince, "Salvation and Tradition", 87.

the transformative potential that is central to the ideas of unity and participation in the Luo culture and which in turn open avenues for dynamic communication among the Luo.

Since communication is taking place at all levels of the rituals, we bear in mind an important insight by Thomas Merton: communion is the deepest level of communication.[75] In other words, the innermost core of communication is not communication itself, but communion. There is, therefore, an implicit objective of communion behind all the funerary rituals.

The final ceremony is thus of special importance to my analysis of Luo funeral rituals. Its direct object is to bring the funeral rituals to an end. The ritual deepens the community's understanding of and connection with the deceased. It is intended to honor and commemorate the deceased. As Hertz rightly points out, it also brings the mourning relatives of the deceased back into *communion* with the society.[76]

The point on communion bespeaks an explicitly religious component that is present in all the stages of the rituals and becomes more pronounced in the final ceremony. The conscious acts of remembrance and honoring the deceased are sacred activities in the realm of religion. The ceremony illustrates the Luo funeral rituals' potential as the nucleus for vibrant faith in their communion with their ancestors. Just as we saw in the first chapter that Christian faith teaches that Christian saints live on after death that so too, the Luo believe that their ancestors live on beyond death. Again just as the Christian patronal feast days are attempts by Christian believers to honor and keep alive the ties with those they believe are in the courts of God, so too the Luo

[75] Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (eds.), *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (N.Y.: A New Directions Book, 1973), 307.

[76] Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, 61-2.

ritual of the final ceremony is a clear example of attempts by the Luo to honor and keep alive the ties they have with their ancestors.[77]

The Luo ritual is a performance that connects the deceased to the relatives and friends a moment of communitas: borders are deliberately broken; the feast is "held to be sacred or 'holy,' … because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency."[78]

It is not only at the closing ceremony that the religious elements come to the fore. Religion is implicit in other rituals as well, since the Luo religious sensibility does not entertain a split between the material and spiritual world. Indeed, as Wallace has rightly observed, the function and nature of ritual is "religion in action."[79] The Luo spiritual sensibility knows intuitively that performance of the funeral rituals is a religious act that secures mystical "blessing, purification, protection and prosperity."[80] We can infer that funeral rituals conceal religious insights behind a façade of communitas. All liminal rituals, in fact, effuse a sacred anti-structurality that fits Turner's theory of communitas that leads to re-integration.

Three particular points have emerged from the present section: (1) The analytical procedures developed by renowned social scientists are helpful in interpreting the Luo funeral rituals which are part of their cultural heritage; (2) the Luo funeral rituals demonstrate the Luo belief that death is a passage into another life—it is not an event, but a process; (3) the most intimate religious practices of the Luo center around remembering, loving, honoring or venerating the deceased members of the society in order to achieve communion among the living, the dead, the unborn, and with God.

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[77] Analysis of the cult of African veneration of ancestors will follow in the next chapter.
[78] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 128.
[79] Anthony F.C.Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View* (New York: Random House, 1966), 102.

[80] Max Gluckman, *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa* (London: Cohen and West, 1963), 24.

As I come to the end of this section and chapter, by way of conclusion I must emphasize the importance of ALL the funeral rituals to the Luo people. As I have emphasized, the rituals are interlinked, so that if one ritual is interrupted, not performed properly, or not performed at all, it will negatively impact the life of individual members of the community and eventually the community as a whole. It is a separate matter if the community is unable or unwilling to perform certain rituals (due, for example, to culture change, unavailable resources or vital persons, or other difficulties). If other factors beyond their control cause unintended changes, for example, stringent ecclesiastical rules or ridicule by other so-called developed civilizations and thereby impede the Luo from performing their funeral rituals, this amounts to a systematic and deliberate destruction of a people. I understand that "progress" takes place in all civilizations and cultures and traditions change over time. However, it is an exceptionally heinous and serious crime against the Luo humanity if they are forced to stop practicing or change their culture against their explicit will.

Unfortunately some observers have mistakenly associated Africans' filial relationship with their ancestors with idolatry (ancestor worship), superstition, and necromancy (communication with the deceased). I will respond to these claims in the next chapter. I will also try to determine whether it is possible to harmonize (partially or completely) the Luo ancestor cult with the Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints that I have treated in the first chapter of this study.

PART 3

LUO ANCESTRAL TRADITIONS AS SIMILAR TO THE BELIEF IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

CHAPTER SEVEN

7.0 LUO CULTS AND ANCESTORS

Introduction

My field research for the present study yielded an unexpected outcome, namely, the surprised reaction of many respondents. They expected me, as a Catholic priest, to concentrate on the power of Christ to defeat and destroy evil spirits, rather than focus on mortuary practices from which for many years they were taught to disassociate.

Many of my respondents answered questions regarding the deceased members of the society with a guarded caution. This caution comes from a long history of teaching, preaching and anthropological writings of Christian missionaries which, in Ogot's opinion, characterized and portrayed Luo religious beliefs and cultural practices as belonging to "poor slaves of ignorance" who were "unchristian and bad."[1] Contrasting the Luo indigenous practices with Christian ones might have served to intensify the Luo fear that it was simply one more Christian intent on demeaning their traditional beliefs and practices.

What is often lacking in the works that dismiss Luo indigenous practices is a constructive anthropology of death that challenges the assumptions, presuppositions, and religious and cultural attitudes of the Luo. In this chapter, I intend to highlight that the Luo funerary rituals not only involve specific practices that mend the social fabric of the community that has been torn by death. These rites also establish a social contract between the living and the dead in a similar way that the cult of the saints does for Christians.

[1] Ogot, "The Construction of Luo Identity and History," in *The Challenges of History and Leadership in Africa*: *The Essays of Bethwell Allan Ogot*., eds. Toyin Falola and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo (Asmara: Africa World Press, 2002), 227.

I will argue that by juxtaposing the Luo spirits of the dead and ancestors alongside Christian saints it is possible to affirm a similarity between the role of the ancestors in the Luo community and the role of Christian saints in the community of the Church.

7.1 LUO CULTS

7.1.1 A theoretical framework

One of the functions of religion, as its etymology indicates, is to affect the spiritual bond which unites the living to supernatural forces. We should expect to find in the various Luo cults of ancestors some evidence of the relations which exist between the world of the living and that of the dead. Moreover, we can expect to find some parallelism between Christian culture and Luo culture. Just as in Christianity *communio sanctorum* is to be located within the *cultus* of the saints—that is, the public veneration of ordinary Christians who were deemed by their society to be saints—so also the veneration of Luo ancestors is to be located within the wider understanding of Luo cults. Studying Luo cults will enable us to understand how the Luo perceive and ritualize their relationship with the dead of their society.

7.1.2 The cult of Nyikang

Since the Southern Luo trace their historical and cultural roots from the Shilluk, an anthropological consideration of Luo cults must begin with the cult of Nyikang. As noted in the previous chapter, Nyikang (also referred to as Nyakang by some authors) is the semi-divine hero

who led the Shilluk in migration to their present home, founded the Shilluk kingdom and its customs, and is often compared to Osiris of Egypt.[2]

Seligman informs us that among the Nilotes, especially the Shilluk, there was one main cult that formed the major traditional practices of the people: the ancestral cult with Nyikang as a special ancetor.[3] Although attention was given to Nyikang, there was a deeper feeling and recognition of the role of other ancestors. That is why Seligman could report that "though the ancestral cult is over-shadowed by that of Nyakang there is yet very much more feeling for and fear of dead ancestors than appears on the surface."[4] Moreover, it is worth noting at this point that the worship owed to God (Juok) was never confused with the cult of Nyikang or that of other ancestors. That is why even before Seligman published his studies, E. O. James had written that "behind the figure of the semi-divine hero, Nyakang . . . there stands the shadowy form of the High God Juok, and although his worship has been eclipsed by that of the divine king and ancestor, yet he remains the Creator and Supreme God."[5] We can infer from these observations that Nyikang was the most significant person among the Shilluk, whose status was deified but differentiated from God. At the same time the observations raise questions, two of which are: first, how did these religious practices in the remote past of the Southern Luo directly or

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[2] Several scholars have compared Nyikang's superhuman powers and cultic features to Osiris. Osiris is the mythical god known to have profoundly influenced the cultural and religious world of the Nile Valley: it was believed that he made the tools of agriculture and taught people how to use those tools; he made laws regarding the institution of marriage and taught people how to worship the gods. Having made the Nile valley a happy country, Osiris blessed the valley and proceeded to bless the rest of the world. See especially Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society & Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 199 ff. and Daryll Forde, *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 154 ff.

[3] Seligman, *The Pagan Tribes of the Sudan*, 1-20.

[4] Seligman, "The Religion of the Pagan Tribes of the White Nile," *Journal of the International African Institute*, 4, no. 1 (Jan., 1931): 16.

[5] E. O. James, "The Idea of God in Early Religions" in *Anthropos* 22, no. 5./6. (Sep. - Dec., 1927): 799.

indirectly influence their present traditional life? Second, what specific cults belonged to the Southern Luo? Let us try to look for some answers by focusing on two other cults.

7.1.3 The cult of Mumbo

An important clarification about Luo cults and ancestors must be made on the basis of social anthropological research. DuPré's analysis of literature on Luo social anthropology concludes that the Luo do not have "a strong history of involvement with cults."[6] However, the one cult that was famous (within the larger cult of ancestors) among the Luo and that received a lot of scholarly attention is the cult of Mumbo, which DuPré herself recognizes and which I already referred to in the previous chapter.

The "cult of Mumbo" is beset with ambiguity and an ostensible lack of descriptive analysis. None of the scholars who make references to it describes the exact nature of cultic practices that are involved. One possible meaning we can discern is that Mumbo was an object of veneration by a certain number of Luo admirers. It also helps to consider the performative formats of ritualized acts that have been followed by some scholars.[7] Durkheim's "social effervescence" is a good example: a group of Luo women performing certain kitchen chores together, or men in a sporting activity or hunting expedition (for examples) have an amplified, excited reaction in the course of such activities and events. When the name of Mumbo is invoked

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[6] DuPré, *The Luo of Kenya*, 56.

[7] See Victor Turner, *The anthropology of performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The elementary structures of kinship*, trans. Harle Bell et. al. (Boston, Beacon Press [1969]). Levi Straus's analysis of kinship is important in studying the Luo's social solidarity in relation to their veneration of Mumbo. Since his *Elementary Structure of Kinship* is heavily influenced by Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, it is important to pay attention to how Durkheim and Mauss assert that society is the source of the very categories of human thought. See Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive classification*, trans. Rodney Needham (Chicago: University of Chicago Press [1963]). P. D'Angelo, "News Framing as a Multiparadigmatic Research Program: A Response to Entman," *Journal of Communication* 52, no. 4 (2002): 870-888; Weber, *Economy and Society*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

at such moments, the communal effervescence produces positive uplifting episodes which make participants feel closer to Mumbo. Such communal emotional reaction can also cause the morals and inhibitions of the participants to align with the Luo values and ethical ideals and so give Mumbo a religious image. The name of Mumbo may also be mentioned by individuals in the daily flow of social interactions. Such interactions become the cultural narratives and practices that magnified the presence of Mumbo in the society and shaped the Luo social identity.[8]

Several scholars have viewed Mumboism as a purely political entity. Shadle, for example, holds this view; he writes that Mumbo was considered as "an anti-colonial resistance movement *par excellence*. Mumbo promised to drive out the imperialists and condemned the white man's religion."[9] There was surely some religious element to Mumboism, considering that any African organized social undertaking regularly has some religious dimension to it. That is why some scholars have questioned the assertion that Mumboism was a patently and entirely an anti-colonial entity, submitting that it was both a religious and political entity.[10] A balanced assessment of Mumbo must therefore be that Mumbo was a political movement— although it was surrounded by a spiritual aura that served to conceal its political ends. Such an assessment is consistent with the historical circumstances and the Luo's social, religious, and political inclination. The one important observation that has not been highlighted by the literature on Mumbo is that, according to Schreiter's typology, Mumbo provides a conceptual basis for the

[8] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms Of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Edward A. Tiryakian, "Collective Effervescence, Social Change And Charisma: Durkheim, Weber And 1989," *International Sociology* 10, no. 269 (1995).

[9] Shadle, "Millennialism and the Serpent God Mumbo in South-West Kenya, 1912-34," 30.

[10] See for example R. Maxon, *Conflict and Accommodation in Western Kenya: The Gusii and the British, 1907-63* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1989); W. Ochieng', *A Pre-colonial History of the Gusii of Western Kenya, c. A.D. 1500-1914* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1977); Ogot, and W. Ochieng', "Mumboism: An Anti-colonial movement", in *War And Society in Africa*, ed. Ogot (London: Cass, 1972), 149-77.

"baseline approach" in the interaction between Christianity and Luo socio-political and religious life.[11] Schreiter built on what other scholars such as the British sociologist Robert Towler called a "common religion," [12] which "emphasizes the fact that the more theological or doctrinal understandings of religion are usually the province of but a small segment of the population, which has been entrusted with the maintenance of religious institutions."[13] The cult of Mumbo might have preserved and maintained the Luo religious institution. Furthermore, the cult was a reactionary movement against colonialism and western religious hegemony, even if it was not fully developed as an African religious enterprise with complex religious structures. It offered the Luo pragmatic ideas at a time when they needed self-adjustment and self-mastery against the backdrop of colonialism.

Mumboism illustrates how the Luo were conscious about the "practice of religion, piety, and observance"[14] and did in fact live their traditional lives in a holistic way that was "not separated in sacred and profane."[15] Furthermore, Mumboism demonstrates that the Luo responded to the novel reality of colonialism and missionary presence by forging among themselves a rich religious sentiment that bound them together.

7.1.4 The cult of the dead

Because of the many social and religious organizations and religious beliefs and practices of the Luo, we need to make an important distinction that has not been clearly identified in the studies

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[11] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 133.

[12] Robert Towler, *Homo Religosus: Sociological Problems in the Study of Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), 145-62. See also Pieter Hendrik Vrijhof and Jacques Waardenburg, eds., *Official and Popular Religion: Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 217 ff.

[13] Schreiter's summary, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 124.

[14] *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Cults (Worship)."

[15] Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 232.

of Luo literature, namely, the distinction between the cult of the dead and the cult of ancestors. Several scholars have pointed out this distinction.

The Ghanaian theologian Kwesi Dickson, for example, has cautioned that the cult of the dead is not to be equated with the cult of ancestors.[16] Dickson's caution is helpful when we keep in mind that the ritual practices of western Africa have cultural and religious features that are markedly different from their east African counterparts. Gluckman is another example of such scholars. In the 1930s he wrote:

> Ancestors represent positive moral forces who can cause or prevent misfortune and who require that their descendants observe a moral code. The cult of the dead, on the other hand, is not exclusively directed to deceased kinsmen, but to the spirits of the dead in general. Here spirits are prayed to for the achievement of amoral or antisocial ends, whereas ancestors can be petitioned only for ends that are in accord with basic social principles.[17]

Gluckman provides a scientific basis on which we can examine the distinction between the cult of the dead and the ancestor cult among the Luo. But whereas Gluckman seems to present ancestors and spirits of the dead as two mutually exclusive forces, the Luo, as I will explain below, perform the cult of the dead in a way that deals with the spirits of the dead and they ultimately consider some of those spirits as ancestors. The spirits of the dead and ancestors are not different entities, but rather similar realities celebrated at different times and in different ways.

The Luo people's major theological, cultural, and philosophical beliefs concerning death and what occurs after death, as well as the relationship between the dead and the living, are expressed in their mortuary rites. The mortuary rites justify a full description of the outward

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[16] Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1984), 69.

[17] Gluckman, "Mortuary Customs and the Belief in Survival After Death Among the South-Eastern Bantu," *Bantu Studies* 11, (1937): 117.

forms of Luo ancestors and require us to explore their inner meaning. Moreover, the rites speak about the sense in which the immediacy and intimacy that exist between the living and the dead can be spoken of as a communion. As I focus attention on Luo ancestors, it is important to address a fundamental theoretical issue for the sake of methodological clarity.

Since the Luo funeral rituals are based upon certain religious and spiritual beliefs, this study considers those religious and spiritual beliefs as the starting points for examining Luo ancestors. Taking this approach to analyze the communion of the dead and the living from the point of view of mortuary rites is not new. It has been validated by such prominent African theologians such as Bénézet Bujo. Bujo suggests that the notion of communion with the dead is central to the worldview of African peoples, as evidenced in traditional rituals such as funeral rites, initiation rites, and hunting ceremonies.[18]

A consideration of Luo mortuary practices provides us with a window through which we can view the presence and action of community members who are perceived to be nearer to God. The mortuary rites therefore do much more than exemplify a communal duty to practice a cult of the dead.[19] Indeed, scholars have not examined at length the assumptions and presumptions that lay behind the Luo mortuary practices. Contemporary studies would no doubt highlight the conjectures and interpretations regarding processes of cultural change and cultural differentiation. In the absence of such studies, I have demonstrated in this study so far that associations do exist between the Luo mortuary rituals and a religious structural complexity. The rites, as Meyer Fortes has rightly concluded from his study of Radcliffe-Brown, constitute

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[18] Bénézet Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation* (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications – Africa, 1990), 73.

[19] I use "cult" in its basic sense of "a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward" the deceased members of the Luo society as defined by the *Concise Oxford American Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

customs that are embedded in social structures and are significant in the social relations of the society.[20]

Previous studies have identified only one cult (Mumbo) among the Luo, perhaps because they viewed Luo cultural practices mainly from the point of view of anthropology and history. It is in the cult of the dead that we study the Luo philosophical and religious presuppositions in regard to *chuny* and *tipo* that I already described briefly above. *Chuny* and *tipo* are some of the concepts that are generally considered as taboo subjects, since the average Luo are unable to say with absolute certainty which of their dead are good spirits and which are malign or malevolent spirits to be construed as messengers and sources of misfortune and evil.[21]

This present study, however, deliberately considers the anthropological and historical points of view and moves further to adopt a distinctively theological perspective. I argue from this theological perspective that Christian missionaries and western authors who downplayed the significance of Luo ritual practices actually engineered the demise of the Luo cult of the dead. Their failure to recognize the religious value of the cultural practices of the Luo reduced the cultural practices and concepts to ideological meanings only. This reduction, we can surmise, led to prejudices that relegated some of the cultic practices of the dead as disreputable and taboo subjects.

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[20] Meyer Fortes, "Pietas in Ancestor Worship: The Henry Myers Lecture, I960" in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 91, no. 2 (1961): 166.

[21] The tendency of scholars, missionaries, and theologians to look down upon and even discourage African religious practices is well known but not always well documented. It is well known, for example, that especially in the early days of Christianity in Africa, African ancestors and spirits were viewed as agents of Satan, and therefore African Christians were indoctrinated into disdain or even contempt for their own African spiritual world-views. According to Eboussi Boulaga, the "language of derision" was complemented with a "language of refutation" which entailed a systematic reduction of so-called pagan religion as the opposite of the good, that is evil or Satan. See F. Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity Without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity* (tr. from French by Robert R. Barr) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 30-33. A good study has been done recently by Sylvester B. Kahakwa, *A Haya Interpretation of the Christian Concept of God: How Applicable is an Invocation of the Deity in a Threefold Form for Indigenizing and Understanding the Christian Trinitarian Model?* PhD Dissertation, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, 2003.

Following Elizabeth M. Bloch-Smith's methodology, the belief in the empowered or deified dead, with the attendant practices stemming from that belief, is here referred to as a Luo cult of the dead.[22] The cult is the social contract that unites the living and the living dead. It is the focus of diverse ritual practices and folk beliefs that have important theological truths about the fate of the society's deceased. In a culture which depends so much on oral tradition, rituals that form cultic practices perform the important task of giving intelligible expression to and encoding the philosophical outlook, religious conceptions and spiritual world view of the Luo. The funeral rituals tell us that a deceased Luo has entered into the world of spirits.

The transformative space in which a deceased Luo enters into a new form of existence has not been given sufficient scholarly attention from a spiritual point of view. Previous studies, for example those of Ongong'a and Wakana that have been referred to above, have emphasized social organization as the primary factor that determines Luo mortuary practices. However, when we view the funeral rituals as cultural, philosophical, and religious acts that are organically linked and important determinants of the Luo spiritual world view, they lead us to interpret the ways in which every Luo, like many other African communities south of the Sahara, perceives the spirits of the dead.

I shall now offer an analysis of the various spirits in the Luo perception.

[22] Elizabeth M. Bloch-Smith, "The Cult of the dead in Judah: Interpreting the Material Remains" *JBL*, 111 no. 2, (1992): 213.

7.2 THE EVIL AND GOOD SPIRITS IN LUO TRADITION

7.2.1 The evil spirits in the Luo traditional worldview

Evil or bad spirits are widely recognized in the African cosmology in a wide variety of names, for example as the "angry souls of the dead."[23] But evil or bad spirits are not peculiar to African traditional religion; they are very well-known in the Western world. The Christian New Testament's Book of Revelation (12:9, 17) refers to Satan and his angels being "hurled down to the earth," making war against the humans on earth. The Apostle Paul (Eph. 6:11-12) cautions the Christian disciples that their enemies are not human but the "spirits of evil."

One of the disturbing observations that is related to St. Paul's warning is the one-dimensional representation and stereotypical image of African ancestors as evil. Often such representations were made by foreigners who viewed African religious traditions through Christian lenses. A clear case in point is Hans-Egil Hauge's study of *Luo Religion and Folklore*. Hauge's work has been criticized by several scholars, among them Ocholla-Ayayo, who referred to it as an "interesting and an irritating book."[24] Unfortunately, Ocholla-Ayayo's criticism fails to highlight and explain Hauge's weaknesses in a comprehensive manner.

One of the weak points of Hauge's study is his apparent misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the role of spirits in traditional Luo religion. Hauge, referring to his interpreters, wrote that

> They all had an excellent knowledge of English, but in translating into English the difficulties of using Christian terminology to describe the religious beliefs of the Luo have to be borne in mind. In time my knowledge of the Luo language reached

[23] Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspectives* (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1989), 214.

[24] A. B. C. Ocholla-Ayayo and James Oyugi Odeck "On Luo Religion and Folklore" in *Current Anthropology*, 21, no. 5 (Oct., 1980), 667.

> the stage where I was able on several occasions to correct my interpreters. For example, they all tended to translate the Luo word *jachien* by the English "devil," which is not correct, since *jachien* signifies the spirit of a dead person.[25]

Although Hauge was conversant with important scholarly works in Luo traditions such as Evans-Pritchard's "Ghostly Vengeance Among the Luo of Kenya,"[26] Hauge himself was not an ethnologist; he did not carry out an independent and original study that could give him the kind of linguistic authority he arrogantly accorded himself in order to "correct" his interpreters. Hauge is emblematic of a trend in which some Westerners worked hard to contrast the indigenous African spiritual concepts that were perceived to be complicated with a user-friendly and comprehensible cosmological order of the dominant Christian culture. From a semiotic perspective, Luo culture encompasses Luo systems of thought and embraces the cultural meanings that are woven into their language — a fact which Hauge, as an outsider, might not have captured. Schreiter's study seems to articulate Hauge's exercise well: Hauge's etic description is phenomenological in its approach, setting the stage for exploration.[27] Without an emic perspective and coming from a Western rationalistic and scientific worldview, Hauge was not equipped sufficiently to understand the Luo holistic experience of the mystery of life, especially in regard to good and evil spirits.

Long before Evans-Pritchard published his "Ghostly Vengeance Among the Luo of Kenya," in which he studied the concept of evil spirits among the Luo, the Mill Hill Fathers had published their *Handbook of the Kavirondo Language*.[28] Building on the Mill Hill Fathers' work,

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[25] Hans-Egil Hauge, *Luo religion and folklore* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974), .

[26] Evans-Pritchard, "Ghostly Vengeance Among the Luo of Kenya" in *Man*, 50 (Jul., 1950): 86-8.

[27] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 58.

[28] Some Fathers of St. Joseph's Society, *A Handbook of the Kavirondo Language: Containing Grammar and Phraseology* (Nairobi: Caxton Printing & Publishing Works, 1920).

Evans-Pritchard found out that *jachien* (a troublesome ghost) is also a concept used by a number of Nilotic languages in varying ways, for example, "*cien* for the Shilluk and Nuer, *acien* for the Dinka, *acieni* for the Anuak, *tchien* for the Luo of the Bahr al-Ghazal, *lacen* for the Acholi, and *chyen* for the Lango."[29] As Ogbu Kalu explains, the Nilotic groups share the widely held belief about evil spirits in Africa:

> Evil sprits pervade. On the whole the human world is inhabited precariously by spirits for good or evil while human beings manoeuvre to tap the resources of the benevolent spirits to ward off the machinations of the devouring spirits. To achieve this vicarious goal, human beings weave enduring covenants with these spirits. Cultic practices are devoted to initiations into covenants, nurturing of the covenants, and renewal of the covenants at major festival points in time.[30]

The entire African society is deeply afraid of the influence of hostile and volatile spirits. And study of African ancestors must include a good understanding of evil spirits because, as Kalu explains, human beings are able to live productive and unharmed if they "weave enduring covenants with these spirits."[31] As for the Luo and their fear of evil spirits, they believe that those who die bad deaths generally return to haunt the living. Evans-Pritchard's study identifies those who are aggrieved in their lifetime and who can possibly return to haunt the living:

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[29] Evans-Pritchard, "Ghostly Vengeance Among the Luo of Kenya," *Man*, 50, (1950): 86. See supporting explanations in Ocholla-Ayayo and James Oyugi Odeck, "On Luo Religion and Folklore," *Current Anthropology* 21, no. 5 (1980): 667-670 as well as

[30] Ogbu Kalu, "Ancestral Spirituality and Society in Africa" in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions*, World Spirituality 3, ed., Jacob Olupona (New York: The Crossroad Publishing company, 2000), 56. This is an area in which very little study has been done. The process of "weaving enduring covenants" with the spirits is open to misunderstanding. Does it mean venerating, or worshiping those spirits? We shall look for some responses below. Meanwhile, John O'Donohue rightly observes that the fear of spirits often leads all Africans, even African Christians, to superstitious beliefs, especially among those who are naturally more timid than those who are of more robust character. Such fears, O'Donohue further observes, lead many to magical and superstitious practices to provide them with immediate success in the here and now. See John O'Donohue, *Spirits and Magic: A Critical Look* (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1981), 17 and 39.

[31] Kalu, "Ancestral Spirituality and Society in Africa," 56-57. Weaving enduring covenants with the ancestors in African terms requires explanations. In the following I will examine some cultural practices and interpretations of such practices, especially as usually applied to African ancestor "worship" and "veneration."

> In the course of my inquiries I was told that the following are typical reasons for a dead person haunting a kinsman: a man is killed and his kinsmen do not exact vengeance or compensation for his death; a man dies unmarried owing to lack of cattle; a man is blamed for some action and commits suicide; a girl is forced into marriage and commits suicide; a son dies while resentful because his father has favoured his brothers; a married woman dies after being accused of witchcraft and beaten; a man dies in a state of shame for some action of his, or in resentment for some affront; a woman dies after an unsettled quarrel with her husband or one of her co-wives; and a ghost is forgotten by his kin. It is said that if a corpse smells it is a sign that the dead person is ill disposed.[32]

Evans-Pritchard's accurately describes the Luos' belief as observed in their ordinary language and ritual practices. The Luo are keen to distinguish between the spirits of those who died a good or bad death. Ogot highlights the emphasis that is sometimes given to bad spirits as being "completely dead," that is, people who have merited their deaths through stealing, adultery, or any other shameful deed.[33] Such evildoers would be buried without attendant rites or elaborate ceremonies and consequently not accorded a dignified place in the collective memory of the community in the category of the living-dead. They are not remembered as ancestors. The Luo believe that certain bad spirits enter human bodies as *yamo* (wind). The concept of spirits of the dead as *yamo* seems to be known even outside of the Luo community. In describing how, in the belief system of Shintoism (Japan's national religion) the dead continue their activities as in life, Cyrus E. Woods writes insightfully:

> A gentle wind carried these kindly tokens in one direction, while a soft mist enveloped land and water, thus creating the illusion of a weird unearthly procession. Even we trembled. Were the spirits of the dead brushing us with their ghostly garments as they returned to their heavenly kingdom?[34]

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[32] Evans-Pritchard, "Ghostly Vengeance Among the Luo of Kenya," 86.
[33] Ogot, "On Making of a Sanctuary," 125.
[34] Cyrus E. Woods, "Spirits of the Dead," in *The North American Review*, 230, no. 4 (Oct., 1930), 478.

The *yamo*, the unknown spirits in Luo country, often manifest themselves in the body as rashes, swellings, and chest discomfort.[35] *Yamo* sometimes manifests itself as *nyawawa* (described above as the frightening phenomenon of collective unknown spirits which pass across Luo land usually from the highlands towards Lake Victoria.)[36] *Jocheinde* is a general African belief that is deeply rooted in the traditional African mindset. Insofar as both *jochiende* and ancestors are spirits, one may argue that the fear of both comes from the substantial body of tradition embedded in the African mind that suggests both kinds of spirits may return to possess a person.

Christianity and its growth among the Luo encouraged a profound conversion to Christ as an alternative to possession by evil spirits. But did Christianity offer a platform whereby the Luo could derive reciprocal enrichment from the wisdom of their rich tradition as well as from Christian tradition? We shall explore this question below. We begin by first looking into how the Luo perceive the nature and presence of the good spirits.

7.2.2 The good sprits in the Luo spiritual world view

Unfortunately, several notable studies of Luo traditional customs have examined the good spirits in Luo belief system through the lens of Malinowski's functionalism and thus presented Luo society simply as a social institution that exists to meet certain physiological needs.[37] Such

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[35] Anyumba, Henry Owuor, "Spirit Possession Among the Luo of Central Nyanza" (Kampala, Uganda: Arts Research Prize, Makerere University, 1954).

[36] J. Roger Kurtz, "Identity and Change in Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's 'Song of Nyarloka,'" *Research in African Literatures*, 33, no. 2 (2002): 105-109. See also Geissler and Prince, *The Land is Dying*, 169.

[37] See especially Hauge, *Luo Religion and Folklore* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Books 1974); Millikin, "Burial Customs of the Wa-Kavirondo in the Kisumu Province," *Man* 6, (1906): 54-56; Stam, "The Religious Conceptions of the Kavirondo"; David William Cohen, and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo, *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape* (London: James Currey, 1989); David Parkin, *The Cultural Definition of Political Response: Lineal Destiny Among the Luo* (London: Academic P, 1978).

studies end up producing forms of theoretical reductionism that jeopardize the possibility of describing and analyzing Luo religious belief systems within a positive anthropological framework. That is why a more complete discussion of good spirits in the Luo spiritual world view must touch two main areas of Luo traditional beliefs: *chuny* and *juogi*. These two areas of belief are key to the understanding of Luo ancestors.

First, as I have pointed out above, the Luo conceptualize selfhood in terms of "*chuny*." When a person has been declared dead, the Luo say "*chunye ochot*" (his or her heart has snapped). The Luo system of thought implies that *chuny*, the sustainer of biological life and the seat of thought, meditation, and imagination, has been severed from the body. None of the scholars writing on Luo traditional beliefs and customs has carried out a systematic study of Luo anthropology of death. Masolo, for example, rightly distinguishes *chuny* from the Western concept of "soul" and asserts that the commonly given response: *odhi e polo* ("he or she has gone to the skies") as to where *chuny* has gone after death, especially since the coming of the missionaries, "does not make syntactical sense."[38] However, Masolo does not offer an alternative explanation. We may conclude from the funerary ritual practices— which reveal an important Luo religious and philosophical presupposition and scholarly insights about the identity of a person beyond death—that the deceased acquires a new and mysterious presence that is both physical and immaterial:

> The soul has definitely left the body and death has taken place, the dead man is not separated from his relatives on that account. On the contrary, he remains near his body, and the care which they bestow upon his mortal remains is inspired by the feeling of his presence, and the risk that would be run if he were not treated according to the customary rites.[39]

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[38] Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World*, 212.

[39] Lucien Levy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality*, (tr. Lilian A. Clare) (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), 69.

Where has the soul "gone"? Ongong'a gives a reasonable explanation that corresponds to the descriptions and analysis of the rites I have put forward so far:

> They know that the spirit has to go through a period of purification, an intermediary state during which it cannot be accepted by the ancestral community . . . This period of purification comes close to the Christian teaching of purgatory. However, for the Luo the period is finalized by the later rites which ensure peace and comfort of the soul, or aid its advance to a higher status in the new world.[40]

The community knows that the spirit will eventually join the ancestral community. Meanwhile community members continue to give meticulous care and attention to the corpse, because they believe *chuny* is mysteriously present with the body. The Luo recognize the mysterious presence of the dead person in a way that Christians do not. Whereas for centuries the Hellenic and Hebraic tensions in the Scriptures led the Christian to adopt dualistic trends that held that the real person was the spiritual and the body simply a shell that was discarded at death, the Luo always believed that the deceased "remains engaged in concrete social relations as long as he's physically present."[41] The Luo are not alone in holding this belief about the journey of the deceased after death. Other African communities hold similar beliefs; for example the Lugbara believe that

> Soon after death, the deceased is thought of as staying somewhere in or around the homestead or just out in the bush, in no fixed place and in a kind of unprecise state. The dead person is still somehow strongly related to his body which must be properly buried at his home.[42]

The deceased remains engaged with the society through the burial rituals. This is a very important area of belief that leads Ongong'a to lament the little prominence that the Catholic

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[40] Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death*, 67.
[41] Geissler and Prince, *The Land is Dying*, 225.
[42] Albert Titus Dalfovo, "The Lugbara Ancestors," *Anthropos*, 92 no. 4/6, (1997): 487.

Church gives to the corpse. According to Ongong'a, the Luo end up performing two burial rites (the Christian and the traditional), a practice he says leads critics to make a serious (and perhaps valid) charge: "The Christian Church has not taken root among us, in fact it divides us."[43]

The superficiality of Christianity about which Ongong'a speaks is a serious threat to Christianity in Africa. Desmond Tutu, the Nobel-prize winning Anglican archbishop emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa, once made a personal confession: "I, though a third-generation Christian, knowing only urban life with a father who was headmaster of an Anglican primary school, feel this division within my own soul."[44] His statement suggests that the Luo, like many other African Christians, live in a spiritually dichotomous situation: they assent to orthodox Christian belief and join in the denunciations of the ancestor rites, but privately pledge their loyalty to their indigenous traditions. This is because they know that performing burial rites properly liberates the deceased and incorporates him into the company of ancestors and enables the deceased to become "a family benefactor . . . a 'parent-saint.'"[45] The deceased is not simply a passive and decomposing corpse, but rather gradually becomes a spiritual entity believed to dwell in a sphere between the human and the sacred, invoked to provide benefits and placated with sacred rituals and offerings to ensure the well-being of the living community

It is important to highlight that from these studies and the information I gathered from the interviews I carried out, the deceased does not become an ancestor immediately after death. Rather, the deceased is believed to enter into the community of ancestors where he or she

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[43] Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death*, 78.

[44] Desmond Tutu, "The Ancestor Cult and Its Influence on Ethical Issues," *Ministry*, 9 no. 3, (July 1969): 103-4.

[45] Ongong'a, *The Luo Concept of Death*, 67. On this point Ongong'a cites Hertz, who sees a parallelism between the rites which introduce the deceased into the company of his ancestors and those which return his family to the community of the living. See also Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, 64.

becomes an intercessor. The process can be considered to be gradual because the values and virtues of the diseased (such as great age, vast wealth and experience in life, an honorable death that is not under disgraceful circumstances) are not proclaimed at any one time during the funeral rituals; there is no public and official declaration of the fate of the diseased up to and including the time of burial.

Choon Sup Bae and P. J. van der Merwe make a clarification that applies to the Luo:

> Although at times the line of division between the two may not be so strict, it follows logically that the category of "the dead" is larger than that of "the ancestors." The "dead" is an open category (which includes all people who have died, either recently or long ago), whereas the category of "ancestors" relates to (more narrowly) the founders of a kinship group, of a community and even of a nation.[46]

Therefore although both Christian and African traditional religions acknowledge the existence of life after death, it is imperative to take a closer look at what the religious presuppositions of the Luo are in this matter and how they differ from Christian beliefs.

Second, Luo people also conceptualize self-identity in terms of collective identity referred to as "*Juogi*" (singular: *juok*). Ocholla-Ayayo aptly explains that

> *Juogi* is a collective term for potentially good spirits, and *juok* is either the singular form of *juogi* or the magical power drawn from them. It is for spirits of this category that Luo name their children. They may be spirits of honored grandparents or of persons of high reputation or social position who had married and had children before their death.[47]

Juogi is implied in the personal name of every Luo. A child assumes the name of his grandparents usually referred to as *nying-juogi* (name of the spirits).[48] The underlying reason for

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[46] Choon Sup Bae & P J van der Merwe, "Ancestor worship – is it Biblical?" *HTS Theological Studies* 64, no. 3 (2008): 1300.

[47] Ocholla-Ayayo and Odeck, "On Luo Religion and Folklore," 668.

[48] Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics Among the Southern Luo*, 182.

this practice, as Crispinous Iteyo explains, is to prevent the power of a newborn child from being diminished and then to enhance that power.[49] The *nying-juok* becomes very dear to the person because it "points towards the vulnerable core of a person . . . it reveals the living human's relation to a dead one, to whom he owes his life force."[50] Giving ancestral names to newborn babies implies linking the newborns with the ancestors, a practice that can be found in many other African societies. Shorter says this is sometimes referred to as "nominal reincarnation" although he says "reincarnation" strictly speaking is rare.[51] The Ga people of Ghana have an infant naming rite which according to them effects a child's "transition from the status of non-person to that of moral person."[52] The Chagga people of Tanzania, for example, formally present a newborn to the relatives within the first nine days, with rich ceremonials. A

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[49] Crispinous Iteyo "Belief in the Spirits of the Dead in Africa: A Philosophical Interpretation" in *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)*, 1 no. 1 (2009): 147. This insight is to be understood against the backdrop of the concept of "vital force" which I have already referred to and will develop further in the following.

[50] Geissler and Prince, *The Land is Dying*, 177. The Luo also follow a principle for naming that is based on the sun's position in relation to the Earth so that there is a Luo name that corresponds with the sun's relative position. A child born at sunrise, for example is called, *Okinyi* (boy) or *Akinyi* (girl); in the evening: *Odhiambo* (boy) and *Adhiambo* (girl); at night: *Otieno* (boy) and *Atieno* (girl). One born at midday is called *Ochieng'* (boy) or *Achieng'* (girl) (*chieng'* is sun). It must be remembered that in the Luo religious world view, the sun is an object of religiosity; this will not be new to any liturgical historian familiar with the adaptation that was done for the feast of Christmas. It is widely held that the reason for the establishment of the date for Christmas may have come from the existing pagan feast of the *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun-God) instituted by the Roman Emperor Aurelian in 274 A.D. to be celebrated on December 25, the day of the winter solstice in Rome and throughout the empire. Christians gradually adopted this feast day and celebrated the feast of the "Sun of righteousness" (Malachi 4, 2), Jesus Christ, who was understood to be the "the light of the world" (John 8,12). See Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics Among the Southern Luo*, 182 and Susan K. Roll, *Toward the origins of Christmas*, (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1995), 107-126.

In naming of children some authors have observed another way in which Western cultural influences have affected the Luo negatively. In the past few years, many Luo distance themselves from *juogi*, preferring Christian names instead. That is why Geissler and Prince have noted that Luo ancestral names are "by definition 'unchristian'" and the Luo therefore tend to hide them. Here is an instance in which the negative impact of Christianity has caused a terrible loss of rich culture of a people. The Luo now "reject the possibility of another person living within the child, which would contradict their Christian faith." See Geissler and Prince, *The Land is Dying*, 177-8. By not taking the ancestral name a Luo fails to placate the ancestor and his survival in the community's ontological conception. We shall see the consequences of such negative impact below.

[51] Shorter, *African Culture and African Church: An Introduction to Social and Pastoral Anthropology*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1974), 60.

[52] Marion Kilson, "The Ga Naming Rite," *Anthropos*, 63/64 no. 5/6, (1968/1969): 904.

week later the baby is lifted towards the snowy summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, during which an ancestor's name is usually conferred with a prayer: "God and guide, lead this child, guide it and let it grow up and arise like the smoke!"[53]

In her 1983 study, Hoehler-Fatton expresses her appreciation for the pervasiveness of belief in *juogi* and describes how the Luo ritualize their belief in the spiritual entities.[54] She also points out what other scholars would agree with: *juogi* are potentially good spirits and "their powers can be tapped for constructive or destructive purposes."[55]

The "African Studies Center and Matrix Digital Humanities Center" at Michigan State University divided good spirits in African religions into two categories, categories that a Luo would relate to in connection with *juogi*:

1. ***The Recent Dead Ancestors:*** the spirits of the recently deceased members of the society who remain actively interested and engaged in the life of their family and community for many years. They intercede with God on behalf of their communities to bring about prosperity and security for their families and communities.[56]
2. ***The Long Dead Ancestors:*** The "long dead ancestors" are ones who have gradually withdrawn from the lives of their descendents and communities. The "long dead ancestors" are believed to be living with God. We can discern some exceptions of some "long dead ancestors" who always remain actively engaged in the lives of the families

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[53] John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion*, (London: SCM Press, 1963), 92-93. Zahan explains that in most African societies the new-born is both a result of fertilization process and a presence of an ancestor. Zahan notes that this belief is defined by the various societies in different ways. See Dominique Zahan, "Some Reflections on African Spirituality" in *African Spirituality: Forms Meanings and Expressions*, World Spirituality 3, ed., Jacob Olupona (New York: The Crossroad Publishing company, 2000), 12.

[54] Hoehler-Fatton, *Women of Fire and Spirit*, xiii.

[55] Hoehler-Fatton, *Women of Fire and Spirit*, xiii.

[56] http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m14/activity2.php The reference to the recently diseased members of the society is arbitrary; we have already noted that the diseased do not automatically attain the status of "ancestor."

> and communities for many generations. The spirit of Nyikang and other great rulers or founders of nations, for example, are believed to maintain their interest and power for a long time after their deaths.[57]

The Luo perceive their relationship to both recently dead and long dead ancestors within a religious understanding that is both reverent and sacrosanct. In such religious contexts, Luo ancestors are referred to as *kwara maber* (literally: my good grandfather). The good grandfather is usually expected to respond to certain temporal needs of the living.

The Luo believe in the power and influence of both the recent and long dead ancestors. The underlying assumption is articulated well by Radcliffe-Brown's suggestion that "the belief in the world of spirits rests on the actual fact that a dead person continues to affect society."[58] The Luo do not articulate their piety and devotion to their ancestors; rather, they ritualize them. It is the task of the social scientist to piece together and decipher the meaning of the rites. Malinowski has sounded the clearest call, one that ought to guide our attentive listening to the Luo rituals:

> Yet it must be remembered that what appears to us an extensive, complicated, and yet well ordered institution is the outcome of so many doings and pursuits, carried on by savages, who have no laws or aims or charters definitely laid down. They have no knowledge of the *total outline* of any of their social structure. They know

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[57] http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m14/activity2.php A key point in understanding these two categories of ancestors ("recently dead" and "long dead") may be expanded by other scholars' interpretations. Zahan who believes that for Africans time has to do with a succession of generations which face toward the past rather than the future suggests that "the ancestral community is in a constant state of renewal" by "newly dead" and the continual disappearance of the ancestors who have become weak in the collective memory of the living. See Zahan, "Some Reflections on African Spirituality," 12 and Zahan, *Religion, Spiritualité et Pensée Africaines*, 141. Mbiti whose understanding of time we have examined above seems to concur with Zahan. Mbiti believes that in African thought time "moves" not forward but backward, therefore to live in the present is not to be moving toward the future, but rather toward the past which corresponds with his insight of "zamani" that we already noted above. Benjamin Ray is a critic who has found these views of time in relation to the dead disagreeable and referred to them as "patently absurd." See his "Recent Studies of African Religions," *History of Religions* 12, no. i, (1972): 83.

[58] Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders: A Study in Social Anthropology, 1906*, (Cambridge: The University press, 1922), 304.

> their own motives, know the purpose of individual actions and the rules which apply to them, but how, out of these, the whole collective institution shapes, this is beyond their mental range. Not even the most intelligent native has any clear idea. . . [of the funeral rituals] as a big, organised social construction, still less of [their] sociological function and implications. . . The integration of all the details observed, the achievement of a sociological synthesis of all the various, relevant symptoms, is the task of the Ethnographer . . . the Ethnographer has to *construct* the picture of the big institution, very much as the physicist constructs his theory from the experimental data, which always have been within reach of everybody, but needed a consistent interpretation.[59]

Definitely no serious scholar today would use Malinowski's language of "savages . . . with no knowledge of their social structure." Nevertheless, Malinowski highlights the inherent challenge in trying to describe and analyze the piety and devotion toward the ancestors. The signs, codes, and messages that are represented by the rituals are what Schreiter has referred to as "semiotic domain," that is, "an assemblage of culture texts relating to" certain undertakings in culture, "which are organized together by a single set of messages and metaphoric signs."[60] The Luo, for example, express their devotion to their ancestors through their culture "texts" which are organized to convey sets of messages and meaningful signs to facilitate communion with their ancestors.

Juogi sometimes return to attach themselves to living persons, a phenomenon the Luo understand to be "spirit possessions." Possession-cult activity among the Luo seems to have a long history that is firmly rooted in the Luo cult of the dead. The Luo country is full of historical and cultural accounts of spirit possessions, and the involvement of spirit mediums in the lives of

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[59] Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, ltd.; New York: E.P. Dutton & co., 1961), 83-84.

[60] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 69.

ordinary people has been the subject of perceptive scholarly analysis.[61] However, to date no systematic inquiry into cases of spirit possessions, in response to I. M. Lewis's recommendation of an epidemiological approach (to spirit possession), has been done.[62] Possessed individuals are usually known to temporarily lose their consciousness, thereby submitting themselves to mysterious forces beyond natural human reasoning.[63] Such individuals are usually known to tremble while performing *dhum* (unintelligible gibberish while in trance states or what some might refer to as speaking in tongues); they are also often characterized by wild, turbulent, and sometimes unruly behavior.

But spirit possession, as strange and feared as it may have been made to look especially after the preaching of the Gospel, is not any stranger than similar phenomena in other religious traditions.[64] In Christianity, a classic example of spirit possession and subsequent exorcism is well known. The account of a Demon-possessed person healed by Jesus is reported in the three

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[61] See for example Michael G. Whisson,. "Some Aspects of Functional Disorders among the Kenya Luo" in *Magic, Faith and Healin: Studies in Primitive Psychiatry today*, ed. Ari Kiev (London: The Free Press of Glencoe Collier-Macmillan, 1964), 283–304; William M. Christie Jr., "A Note on the Kinship System of Kenya Luo," *Studies in African Linguistics*, 14, no. 3, (December 1983); Hoehler-Fatton, *Women of Fire and Spirit*.

[62] I. M. Lewis, "Spirit Possession and Deprivation Cults" in *Man* l, no. 1 (I966): 307-329.

[63] Benjamin M. O. Odhoji, "The Body as a Figurative Code in Luo Popular Culture, Vernacular Literature, and Systems of Thought," *Postcolonial Text*, 5, no 3 (2009): 10.

[64] Two kinds of causal explanations dominate the anthropological literature on spirit possession. The first kind claims that it is psychiatrically oriented. According to this genre of literature, spirit possession is a manifestation of overtly powerless individuals who ritualize their frustration to compensate for otherwise unobtainable goods or gain attention. Peter Wilson is a fine example of authors of this genre. He makes an interesting observation that should interest us since the Luo is a patrilineal society: spirit possession and possession cults arise in traditionally male-dominated societies where women are often excluded from active and social life, considered ritually inferior, and relatively jurally deprived. See Peter J. Wilson, "Status Ambiguity and Spirit Possession," in *Man* 2, no. 3 (1967): 366-378. Such "male-dominated societies" is not simply a Luo or African problem. The polarization and stereotypical gender roles that pervaded Western culture is well known. In those cultures, the individuals who exhibited supernatural powers and the intense exemplars of lay spirituality were women who were often considered especially vulnerable to the snares of the devil. See for example Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), 129-175. The second causal explanation attributes spirit possession to "likelihood of deficiencies in thiamine, tryptophan-niacin, calcium, and vitamin D in women in Old World traditional societies in which poverty and/or sumptuary rules restrict women's nutrient in-takes more than those of men." See Alice B. Kehoe and Dody H. Giletti, "Women's Preponderance in Possession Cults: The Calcium-Deficiency Hypothesis Extended," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 83, no. 3 (Sep., 1981): 549-561.

synoptic Gospels (Matthew 4:23-25, Mark 1:29-39, also Luke 6:17-19).[65] Many scholars have discerned similar phenomena in other religions and cultures.[66] Nancy Caciola, for example, has insightfully shown that occult phenomena including trance states, prophesying, convulsions, and other psycho-physical manifestations were very significant features of the religious culture of medieval Western Europe.[67] Moreover, as many scholars of that period have shown, discernment of spirits was a complicated spiritual exercise. It was often difficult to determine whether or not a prophecy, a vision, or any other supernatural manifestation, was truly from God or not —and consequently who was to be venerated as a saint and who avoided, either as a demoniac possessed of an unclean spirit, or simply a fraud.[68]

There seems to be a cultural normative framework within which the phenomenon of spirit possession operates among the Luo. Although the phenomenon is feared, whenever it happens it is viewed as normal part of collective cultural and religious phenomena. In fact Ogot provides us with a theoretical basis within which we have an example of Luo spirit-possession and its

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[65] The New Testament has other incidences that show the control of a human subject by a malevolent supernatural being. Relevant biblical passages include Mt 9:32-33; 12:22; 17:18; Mk 5:1-20; 7:26-30; Lk 4:33-36; 22:3; Acts 16:16-18. Since the times of these New Testament recorded accounts, the examination of spirit possession has always oscillated between divine and demonic interpretations. Langley Myrtles has studied the Malaysian séance, Somali protest movements, Kenyan warriors' shaking, and Afro-Christian possession cult and provides us with interesting and enlightening paradigms for studying possessions in primal societies. See his "Spirit-Possession, Exorcism and Social Context: An Anthropological Perspective With Theological Implications," *Churchman* 094, no. 3 (1980): 235. For the different approaches to studies and bibliography see especially Matt Goldish (ed.), *Spirit Possession in Judaism: Cases and Contexts from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003); J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Spirit-Possession and the Gerasene Demoniac," in *Man*, 14, no. 2 (1979): 286-293; Sarah Ferber, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern France* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004).

[66] The renowned anthropologist Erika Bourgignon has argued that spirit possession (1) because it is manifested in all known religions in varying forms is a universal phenomenon and (2) its universality is a well-recognized fact of physical anthropology due to the fact that regardless of race and heredity, human brains everywhere, unless there are known congenital abnormality, contain the same basic physiological structure. Erika Bourgignon, *Possession* (San Francisco, CA: Chandler and Sharp, 1976), 23.

[67] Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press, 2003).

[68] Wendy Love Anderson, *Discernment of Spirits: Assessing Visions & Visionaries in the Late Middle Ages* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 255.

continuity into Christianity through the example of Legio Maria Church. Ogot asserts that spirit-possession was a prerequisite for membership of the Legio.

> The people who qualify to join the church are those who are initially possessed by evil spirits which are then exorcised. The vacated houses of the evil spirits in the body are then occupied by the Holy Spirit. The person thus becomes purified and transformed, but remains possessed.[69]

"Remains possessed" is more the belief of the local people than the actual spiritual condition of the person after exorcism has been preformed. The local people believe that the previously possessed person may sometimes speak and act in ways that conform to the identity of the possessing spirit. Myrtles who has more insights in these cultural beliefs says the expression implies that the possessing spirit is "domesticated" that is, it is "accommodated" in such a way that local people come to terms with it, live with it, and normal behavior of the previously possessed person is ensured.[70]

In the final analysis, we are led to ask: is it reasonable to view the phenomenon of spirit possession among the Luo as a negative phenomenon and therefore a drawback to the understanding of the institution of Luo ancestors, or can it be viewed rather simply as a human phenomenon that can not be easily explained and that is found in other cultural traditions as well? The latter response seems plausible. Moreover, Christianity, aided by social sciences, can offer helpful resources to handle the phenomenon more effectively. Through Christian exorcisms, invading spirits are not just "accommodated" but are expelled from possessed persons and a return by the possessed person to their regular life is ensured. Proper biblical formation will also offer liberating solutions, for example, Gehman has rightly pointed out that based on

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[69] Cited in Langley Myrtles, "Spirit-Possession, Exorcism and Social Context: An Anthropological Perspective With Theological Implications," *Churchman* 094, no. 3 (1980): 235.

[70] Myrtles, "Spirit-Possession, Exorcism and Social Context," 226.

interpretation of 2 Samuel 12:23 and Job 19:27, the righteous dead cannot return and communicate with the living since such dead are in the hands of God.[71]

7.3 THE LUO ANCESTRAL TRADITIONS

7.3.1 Juogi, chuny, and the Luo ancestors

DuPré asserts that "An important function of ancestor worship is the power it provides elders."[72] While this assertion insightfully highlights two important areas (ancestors and ancestor worship) that are relevant to this study, it also raises three major questions. First, how are Luo elders related to their ancestors? Second, what kind of "power" do the ancestors have? Third, do the Luo worship their ancestors? Let us look for some responses.

As Mbiti rightly explains and many observers would agree, elders are the family members with the longest "Sasa" (explained above as "now") period and therefore the ones with longest memory of the living dead.[73] Luo elders are biological or representative heads of ancestral lineages among the Luo. The fundamental principle of Luo social structure, the bond of kinship that bestows the ancestral lineage as a collection of distinct peoples or territories that produce a neat organizational structure, conforms to ethnological and ethnographic presentations of peoples elsewhere in Africa.[74] The social organizations and kinship relationships were never studied until the 1930s.[75] These studies tell us that the Luo belong to a basic traditional social

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[71] R. J. Gehman, *Who are the living-dead? A Theology of Death, Life After Death and the Living-Dead* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1999), 178.

[72] DuPré, *The Luo of Kenya*, 53.

[73] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 26.

[74] M. Wilson, "The Nguni people" in *A history of South Africa to 1870*, eds. M. Wilson and L. Thompson (Cape Town, SA: David Philip, 1982), 123; P. Mayer and I. Mayer, *Townsmen or tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanization in a South African City* (Cape Town, SA: Oxford University Press, 1974)

[75] A. W. Southall, *Lineage Formation Among the Luo* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford Universoty Press, 1952); Samuel G. Ayany, *Kar Chakruok Mar Luo* (Kisumu: Nyanza Printing Works Limited, 1951), 31; Shadrack

structure known as *jokawuoro* (of same father). Several *jakawuoro* extended to different generations form clans known as *jokakwaro* (of the same grandfather). All living Luo project their social relationship into the supernatural sphere, which is considered as the sacred space of *kwerewa* (our ancestors).

A Luo is born into and becomes integrated into a web of relations that revolve around *kwerena* (my grandfathers) because kinship grouping and the family tree is always traced patrilineally.[76] Every Luo easily speaks of *kwerewa* (plural for "grandfather") to refer to "our ancestors". That is why Ocholla-Ayayo explains that the Luo refer to their living dead as *Juok ka Kwaro*.[77] The Luo speak of an "ancestor" when referring to a single individual genealogical head of a clan or community.

It is noteworthy that a Luo refers to a single male individual (*kwara*) while operating in a communalist world view which sets itself apart from a Western Cartesian individualist notion of self as a single individual. In a sense, therefore, women are included in the Luo "ancestor" designation.[78] When a Luo ordinarily speaks of *kwerewa* it usually implies grandfathers, and in

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Male, *Dhoudi Moko Mag Luo* (Kisumu: Oluch- Publishing House, 1950), 114-115. The strength of these studies lies in their attempts to portray Luo clans as permanent and historical. Thus they provide a stable basis on which other studies may be based. William Sytek's doctoral dissertation based on Luo kinship and social organization was published in 1972. Sytek's study builds on the earlier studies to show the social changes that took place in the Luo traditional relationships and social organizations. See William Sytek, *Luo of Kenya* (New Haven, CT: Human Relations Area Files, 1972).

[76] There is abundant literature that describes the features of the patrilineal or matrilineal societies in Africa. J. D. McKnight, for example, highlights the contrasting examples of the Tallensi of northern Ghana, in which the membership of an individual member of the group is traced patrilineally, and the Plateau Tonga of Zambia, in which the matrilineal system of descent determines how an individual belongs to the society. See J. D. McKnight, "Extra-Descent Group Ancestor Cults in African Societies," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 37, no. 1 (1967): 1-21.

[77] Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics Among the Southern Luo*, 182.

[78] Scholars have studied the specific ways in which the Luo patrilineal society operates inclusively in favor of women. For example Nancy Schwartz, a scholar of religion, takes the Luo as an example, and argues that not only do women in patrilineal societies "have certain powers precisely because they are in patrilineal societies, or *patrilineal societies of certain kinds*," but also that "polygyny…and the house property complex can make for highly matrifocal and matricentric patriliny which can be positive for women both as living actors and as ancestors." Furthermore, Schwartz suggests that the Luo reverence for ancestors could work to the advantage of living women in relation to the securing of rights and privileges, because "ancestral spirits and properly buried bodies can support

this sense includes all other males related to him through consanguinity or affinity at his generational level and from this level upward. The Southern Luo refer to themselves as *Nyikwa Ramogi* (descendants of Ramogi)[79] (more will be said about this designation below) and *Joka-Nyanam* (the people of the daughter of the lake). Thus it can be seen that the expression *kwerewa* (ancestors) combines elements of both the maternal and paternal lines which may represent the cumulative Luo ancestral generations in a given time.

A Luo is born into a community that includes the living and the living dead. The Luo participates and derives his or her identity from a network of affective relations, and speaks of his or her ancestors in a way that is consistent with how all human beings refer to their ancestors.

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claims to land in various ways." See Nancy Schwartz, "Active Dead or Alive: Some Kenyan Views about the Agency of Luo and Luyia Women Pre- and Post Mortem" in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 30, no. 4 (2000): 434-6.

An important point of comparison is in order here. The Luo patrilineal society can be compared to the patriarchal tradition that has characterized the Catholic Church for centuries. One of the consequences of that patriarchy is that for many centuries women were relegated to the margins; the majority of biblical saints, and later Christian ascetics, martyrs, confessors, pastors, and others designated as holy people for many centuries were overwhelmingly men. Scholars such as Elizabeth Johnson, for example, have described how in the past, women's holiness was suppressed by the dominant-subordinate patterns of ecclesiastical relationships that were entrenched in the system of sainthood. Despite the observed masculine monopoly, scholars, particularly feminist theologians since middle of 19th century have studied feminine sanctity and spirituality and advanced the cause of feminine emancipation. Similarly, African scholarship has in the recent past highlighted the fundamentally important place of the woman in Luo society. Mbiti, for example, has observed that the Luo is one of the African communities with creation myths that say the first human pair was lowered by God from the sky to the ground (earth). See Mbiti, "Flowers in the Garden: The Role of Women in African Religion" in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Olupona (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 61. For a relevant collection of Luo proverbs and sayings about women see Simon Okumba Miruka, *Oral Literature of the Luo* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publication, 2004). Scholars such as Simeon Hongo Ominde in his *Luo Girl From Infancy to Marriage* (London: Macmillan, 1952) have sought to recapture the distinctive role of women in the Luo society. Such studies aim at reinforcing the important place of the Luo woman. They amplify and reinforce an ideological statement about the vital role of the woman in the Luo tradition as well as her pervasive role in the construction of the various ancestral traditions.

[79] Ramogi as the common eponym from whom the Southern Luo descended has been disputed by some critics. Although it is a popular name, some critics argue that Ramogi is merely a mythical Luo "ancestor" that serves to legitimize ethnic solidarity. Ogot, for example, asserts that all Luo are not "Jo-Ramogi" (people of Ramogi). According to Ogot, the origins from Ramogi is a mythical account that comes from an earlier legend of Luo connection with heaven. According to that legend the Luo originated from a man named Podho "who descended from the heavens at Lamogi or Ramogi Hill in the northern part of Uganda." Nevertheless, Ogot concludes from numerous documented legendary narratives that "If Podho is regarded as the Adam of the Luo, Ramogi features in their traditions as the Abraham." See Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo*, 142-4. See also Crazzolara, *The Lwoo*, Part II, 210-12. All in all, Ramogi remains an important patriarchal legend for the Luo that even Ogot writes about inconsistently: at times denying his existence and affirming his existence at other times. In a solemn occasion in which a solemn oath was required, for example, Ogot writes that the swearing parties were made to swear "in the name of Ramogi our ancestor and in the name of God." Ogot, *My Footprints in the Sands of Time: An Autobiography*, (Victoria, British Columbia Trafford Publishing, 2006), 238.

This sense has been described well by Donald Wuerl who rightly notes that "All men are bound to their ancestors by the gratitude and reverence that is 'piety'— the virtue that links us to our origins as does family piety, patriotic piety, even the piety we owe to God."[80]

Building on Wuerl's insight we may observe that the Luo piety is extended to their ancestors (both male and female). That piety is accentuated by the fact that the Luo lives within the confines of the customs and traditions that have been codified, sanctioned, maintained, and preserved by the ancestors for the future generations. Under ordinary circumstances a Luo is constantly aware of the ancestors and can make a spontaneous claim that he or she lives as "our ancestors lived."[81]

There is a spiritual link that envelops all Luo and immerses them into the tradition of their ancestors. As Mbuy rightly points out: "Two pillars hold the African concept of life: a sense of community belonging and reverence for tradition."[82] That spiritual link is represented by the elders, who are perceived to be closer to the ancestors and custodians of ancestral traditions. Igor Kopytoff expresses it well when he writes that "The linkage is structured through the elders of the kin-group, and the elders' authority is related to their close link to the ancestors."[83] The Luo elders' authority can be compared to the Jewish oral tradition at the time of Jesus when "traditions of the elders" were authoritative and could be sinned against. A Luo could be guilty of violating the ancestral traditions and could face criticism or expulsion from the society.

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[80] Donald Wuerl, *Fathers of the Church* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1974), 8.

[81] Ogot, "The Construction of Luo Identity and History," in Toyin Falola and Atieno-Odhiambo, eds., *The Challenges of History and Leadership in Africa: The Essays of Bethwell Allan Ogot*, (Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2002), 231.

[82] T. H. Mbuy, *Understanding Witchcraft Problems in the Life of an African: Case Studies from Cameroon* (Owerri, Nigeria: High Speed Printers, 1992).

[83] Igor Kopytoff, "Ancestors as Elders in Africa" in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 41, no. 2 (Apr., 1971): 129.

The second way by which the Luo refer to their ancestors is by the use of *jok* and *juok*. As I already described above, these are concepts that are used to refer to God as a mystical force or vital powers in a similar sense that Placid Tempels used vital force.

It is reasonable to conclude that DuPré's assertion is vaguely referring to the web of relationship that constitutes a Luo society. It is a relationship that is organized under an elder and projected into the sacred space of ancestors. It is a relationship that is absolutely vital for the life of the community, for as Lévy-Bruhl articulates: ". . . when the head of the family or some important member ceases to exist, the group in a certain sense begins to die also. For the real living being is the group: individuals exist only through it."[84] It is therefore inaccurate and misleading to speak of a power that ancestor "worship" bestows on the elders.

7.3.2 The power of ancestors

DuPré's assertion about the "the power that ancestor worship gives," seems to suggest she is viewing the transcendental beings in Luo traditional cosmos through Western epistemology and methodology. A Western epistemology and cosmology naturally tends to defend an essentialized Christianity that places Western theology as the epistemic model and pattern of theologizing.

Since we are dealing with Luo ancestors who represent their religious, ethical and institutional values, an important question must be asked: what does a Luo make of the pervasive and dominant presence of the mystical and mysterious powers of the ancestors? To answer this question, it might be good to first examine Terrence Tatje and Francis L. K. Hsu's broad framework on which beliefs about spirits of the dead in Africa are viewed, based on notable

[84] Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *The 'Soul' Of The Primitive* (trans. Lilian A. Clare, a foreword by Evans-Pritchard) (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1971, c1966), 69.

ethnographers' studies. The two scholars identify seven specific theoretical links between the living and deceased as follows:

1. *Absence of spirits*: general absence of beliefs in the existence of human "spirits," "souls," "ghosts," etc**.**
2. *Neutral spirits*: general belief in the existence of spirits of the dead, but such spirits are not believed to have any active influence on the affairs of the living.
3. *Undifferentiated spirits*: general belief in the existence of spirits of the dead as a potential source of help or harm to the living, but no specific importance is attached to the spirits of ancestors or close kin or clan members; if worshipped at all, spirits are worshipped generally without specific reference to ancestors or departed kin.
4. *Malicious-Capricious ancestral spirits:* general belief in the existence of ancestral spirits and in their importance to the descendants' affairs; accompanied by fear of arbitrary harm from them.
5. *Punishing ancestral spirits:* general belief in the existence of ancestral spirits and in their importance to the descendants' affairs; these spirits will punish neglect or serious moral or ritual transgressions but do not actively help their descendants.
6. *Rewarding-punishing ancestral spirits:* general belief in the existence of ancestral spirits and in their importance to the descendants' affairs; these spirits are as a rule helpful to their descendants but will also punish neglect or serious moral or ritual transgressions.
7. *Benevolent-rewarding ancestral spirits:* general belief in the existence of ancestral spirits and in their importance to the descendants' affairs, but with no fear of harm or punishment from them. They are believed to give help whenever possible and to reward good without punishing the bad.[85]

What applies to the Luo applies in some way to many other African societies. Therefore we cast the question within the larger context of other African peoples. There is a plethora of beliefs in and rituals concerning ancestors that converge in some ways but also diverge and are in tension in other ways. A Western typology of religion[86] has influenced the way in which African ancestors have been studied and discussed. Such typologies approach the study of ancestors as a

[85] Terrence Tatje and Francis L. K. Hsu, "Variations in Ancestor Worship Beliefs and Their Relation to Kinship," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1969): 157.

[86] Westerlund has lamented how scholars have "abstracted African religions from their cultural and historical contexts" and the tendency of anthropologists to "Westernize" African religious practices. See D. Westerlund, "The Study of African Religions in Retrospect from 'Westernization' to 'Africanization,'" in *Religious plurality in Africa: Essays in honour of John S. Mbiti, eds.*, J.K. Olupona & S.S. Nyang (Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 59. See also Jacob Beyers, "What is Religion? An African Understanding," *Original Research* 66, no. 1 (2010): 1.

human phenomenon and present the African ancestors within conventionalized, scholarly, religious epistemologies and methodologies.[87] The majority of these studies are social and anthropological in nature and offer little chance for theological investigation of the subject.

Charles Nyamiti recognizes this complexity and rightly points out that "there is no uniform system of beliefs on ancestors in black Africa."[88] Therefore we may not expect a common definition of who ancestors are, their function, or the societies' perception of the total extent of their power and presence. However, there is a near unanimity of scholars in regard to certain ancestral features that confirms a supposition that it is possible to obtain a working definition of African ancestors. Three examples may be mentioned. First, The Tswana theologian Gabriel Setiloane has poetically expressed insights which many scholars and ordinary Africans readily agree with:

> Ah, . . . yes . . . it is true.
> They are very present with us
> The dead are not dead; they are ever near us;
> Approving and disapproving all our actions,
> They chide us when we go wrong,
> Bless us and sustain us for good deeds done,
> For kindness shown, and strangers made to feel at home.
> They increase our store, and punish our pride.[89]

Second, the Senegalese poet and story-teller Birago Diop, who is highly regarded as an outstanding African francophone writer, also spoke for many Africans when he wrote:

> Those who are dead have never gone away,

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[87] Within the academic circles, African ancestors have been recognized as very vital and central aspect of African traditional religions. This centrality has made a huge impact particularly in the development of African Christological thinking. Scholars in African theology have proposed ancestral Christology as a viable point of departure to develop African Christology, as I will explain below.

[88] Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology From an African Perspective* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984), 15.

[89] Gabriel M. Setiloane, "How the Traditional World-View Persists in the Christianity of the Sotho-Tswana," in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, eds. Edward Fashole-Luke et al, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 407.

> They are at the breast of the wife.
> They are in the child's cry of dismay
> And the firebrand bursting into life.
> The dead are not under the ground.
> They are in the fire that burns low
> They are in the grass with tears to shed,
> In the rock where the whining winds blow
> They are in the forest, they are in the homestead.
> The dead are never dead.[90]

Apart from describing the power and presence of the ancestors, the two authors above, African theologians, highly educated and Westernized in their own ways, seem to be expressing their own inner struggle and passionate desire to be linked with their ancestors. E. Gwembe offers a concise summary showing that ancestral beliefs are of utmost importance to all Africans:

> In all the black-African societies, the relationship of the living with the dead, and in particular with the ancestors, is the aspect to which the African is most devoted. It is without doubt the crucial point of African culture, and because of this, the most important heritage.[91]

The Luo share in all these beliefs; in fact, a good place for this study to begin looking at the definition of ancestors is a close attention to the Luos' ways of describing their ancestors. In their free-flowing unstructured language, the Luo give a detailed meaning of who their ancestors are.

First, ancestral studies have defined African ancestors by describing the features that qualify deceased members of the society to be an ancestor. The scholars agree that not everyone who dies automatically becomes an ancestor. The Ghanaian Bishop Peter Sarpong summarizes key points that also reflect Luo cultural beliefs and which many authors will readily agree with. Sarpong highlights three specific conditions that must be fulfilled by those who are to be

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[90] Birago Diop, "Breath" in *A Book of African Verse*, eds. John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1964), 25-26. First published as "Souffles" in *Leurres et Lueurs* (Paris: Présence Africain, 1960). See also Aylward Shorter, "Conflicting Attitudes to Ancestor Veneration in Africa" *AFER* 11 (1969): 31.

[91] E. Gwembe, "Ancestors in African Culture" in *The Church and Culture: Conference Papers*, eds. M. Makobane, M. B. Sithole, and M. Shiya (Lumko, Germiston: Mazenot Institute, 1995), 30.

recognized as ancestors: (1) The person is to pass through the critical stages of life that includes attaining adulthood, which is generally determined by marriage rather than simply by old age and which assumes procreation.[92] A married Luo, for example, earns a high status in society whereas an unmarried Luo can only participate in a minimal way in the life of the community, which is why I wrote in the previous chapter that they are buried without attendant rites or elaborate ceremonies. (2) The person must die a natural death, excluding tragic or violent deaths such as those by accident, suicide, unclean diseases or in childbirth.[93] Moreover, such natural deaths, as we saw with Luo traditions, must be without physical struggle, bitterness, or emotional anguish. (3) By the community's standards, the deceased person has led an exemplary life, demonstrating good characters and behavior according to traditional morality. These qualifying features are very consistent with the Luo traditional concept of "a good death," as I described in above, and therefore would qualify a deceased for inclusion among the ancestors.

Second, the functions of ancestors have been analyzed. Scholars have discerned that when an ancestor is remembered, honored or venerated, and invoked for their intercessory roles by their living kin, the living kin are aware of certain ancestral functions. Such functions have been analyzed by several authors and expressed succinctly by Nyamiti as cultural foundations of ancestral beliefs. The features are as follows:

1. *Kinship*: between the dead and the living kin. In many cases the ancestor has to be the source of life for the earthly relatives.

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[92] Peter K. Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema, Ghana: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974), 35.

[93] Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 35. See also Kalu who adds that "the person was not killed by lightning, or a falling tree, did not drown or commit suicide, and was not killed by a strange disease such as small pox or leprosy." Ogbu Kalu, "Ancestral Spirituality and Society in Africa" in *African Spirituality: Forms Meanings and Expressions*, (World Spirituality 3), ed. Jacob Olupona (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 57.

2. *Superhuman status*: usually acquired through death. It implies a person's nearness to God, sacred powers, and other superhuman qualities.
3. *Mediation*: between God and earthly kin because of their supernatural status and proximity to God. Due to their proximity to God they "possess more *jok* power than their living brothers and sisters, and hence they are more powerful and nearer *Were* (God)."[94] Their role as mediators is widely known even by writers outside the mainstream African scholarship. James Wiseman, for example, notes that one of the common features of African Traditional Religion is "belief in other spiritual beings [other than God], including ancestors, who can *mediate* between humans living on earth and the Supreme Being."[95]As intermediaries, the living are devoted to them so that they pervade every aspect of life and endeavor of a Luo from cradle to grave. From the moment a Luo is born until his or her death, important activities are linked to the religious implications of the presence and action of the ancestors.
4. *Exemplarity* as models of good behavior in the community.
5. *Right or title to frequent sacred communication* with the living kin through prayers and ritual offering.[96]

Third, ancestors have been presented especially by the structural–functionalist anthropologists as central forces in the reproduction of the moral, juridical, and economic order in African societies.[97] Other scholars have labored to show that the study of African ancestors can help to

[94] Ogot, "On Making of a Sanctuary," 125.
[95] James Wiseman, *Spirituality and Mysticism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 188.
[96] Nyamiti in Schreiter, 11.
[97] See Kopytoff, "Ancestors as Elders in Africa," 129-142.

reclaim the lost centrality of community living and provide a good foundation for moral living. Thus, Monica Hunter writes that "the power of the ancestors to support morality is believed to be effective within the immediate group of close kinsmen and *affines*."[98] Bujo highlights the relationship between morality and the power of the ancestors: "Not only does what happens to the living concern them but our attitudes and acts can strengthen or diminish the life of the dead. Negatively, our acts can be an offence to our ancestors."[99]

Fourth, studies show anthropological accounts of how ancestors continue to maintain a significant presence among the living. Such studies show how ancestors continue to influence the health and success of their descendants. A few examples are in order. (1) When clan chiefs assemble the villagers to make peace among some clans in Congo, the people gather in the ancestral sites. The chiefs plead with the "ancestors to remember the love for their descendants and to provide them with [a] ram"[100] to be used in sacrifice. The Luo also believe that the ancestors are very near to the living and can be asked to join the living in important undertakings of the society. (2) Kabasélé writes that the living heighten their consciousness of the ancestors in all important events of life and indeed in all acts of daily life. Such consciousness is illustrated, for example, by food and drink libations: tossing some small amounts of food or pouring some drink to the ground to invite the participation of the ancestors before taking such foods or drink.[101] In the *buru* rite in the previous chapter, I have already described how the Luo appreciate the significance of ritual libation. The ritual libations summon the ancestors to join the living in

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[98] Monica Hunter, "An African Christian Morality" *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 10, no. 3 (Jul., 1937): 291.

[99] Bujo, "Can Morality be Christian in Africa?" *African Christian Studies: The Journal of the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic Higher Institute of Eastern Africa*, 4 (1988): 8.

[100] Uzukwu, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

[101] Libations are ordinarily tossed or poured by the individual or social group to his or their own ancestors. See also John Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," *Sociological Analysis*, 37, no. 1, (1976): 10.

performing ordinary daily tasks, thereby sanctioning the acts of the living. The Ga people, who inhabit mostly the Greater Accra Plains and the eastern region of Ghana, say in their libation prayer:

> What is today? Today is Monday, Grandfathers' Monday, Grandmothers' Monday. Today we will show the stranger that sojourns with us to the Morning Star, May it respect the world, May you (the ancestors) receive some of this wine and drink That you may bless it.[102]

Moreover, "if such a one happens to sneeze he or she will speak the name of an ancestor, as if asking for a blessing. When surprised, the devout *Muntu* [person] will utter the ancestor's name as if to say, 'be surprised with me!'"[103] (3) In northern Cameroon, each male head of family posses a jar called *Baba* (which is also how one addresses one's father when alive) or *pra* (which also represent both the ancestor and the cult offered). The *Baba* or *pra* is believed to be where one's dead father or grandfather resides. It is kept in the most privileged place within the house. Whenever prayers are recited over it, the participants in the prayer address it as though they were talking to an actual person before them.[104]

This pervasive presence of ancestors is acknowledged by African communities beyond the Luo examples and other examples I have cited. Perhaps an argument can be made that African peoples have both nebulous and well-defined ideas of the active presence of ancestors in their lives.

Unfortunately, two areas are seriously lacking in these studies. First, they fail to recognize a strategic hurdle to overcome before we can discuss African ancestors in any meaningful way. The hurdle is a succinct and clear definition of what an African ancestor is. This necessary

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[102] Marion Kilson, "The Ga Naming Rite," in *Anthropos*, (Bd. 63/64, H. 5./6., 1968/1969): 908.
[103] Kabasélé, "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother," 119.
[104] Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African*, trans. John Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 16.

definition of an African ancestor is vital both for the student of religion and for the Christian missionary and evangelist. There is no commonly agreed upon single definition of "ancestor." *The Oxford American College Dictionary* defines an ancestor as "a person, typically one more remote than a grandparent, from whom one is descended."[105] While this definition may seem to be simple, clear and straightforward, the African concept of an ancestor as scholars demonstrate is broader and more complex than the Western notion of linear descent from a forebear. Some scholars have tried to define who African ancestors are. Unfortunately their definitions are not comprehensive and succinct enough. Nyamiti, with his impressive list of functions of ancestors, for example, provides a definition that does not include all the concepts that he himself outlines. He defines an ancestor as "a personal parent of another person of whom he is the archetype of both nature and behavior, and with whom he is entitled to have a regular sacred relationship through communication of some sort."[106] Other attempts include Francis Oborji's, who defines an ancestor as a person who has made it to the spirit-world and is venerated by his or her descendants.[107] François Kabasélé's definition is that ancestors are "the persons who are the source of life and obligatory route to the Supreme Being."[108] According to Meyer Fortes "An ancestor is a named dead forebear who has living descendants of a designated genealogical class representing his continued structural relevance."[109] Chris Nwaka Egbulem's definition is more elaborate but still lacks the necessary depth. Egbolem writes: "ancestors are those members of

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[105] *The Oxford American College Dictionary*, s.v. "ancestors."

[106] Nyamiti, *African Tradition and the Christian God,* (Spearhead no. 49), (Eldoret: Gaba Publications, 1978), 48.

[107] Francis Anekwe Oborji, *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion: Issues of Interpretation and Mission*, (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 2005), 26.

[108] Kabasélé, "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother" in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, Schreiter (ed), 116.

[109] Meyer Fortes, "Some Reflections of Ancestor Worship in Africa," in Meyer Fortes and G. Dieterlen, (eds.), *African Systems of Thoughts*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 124.

the family or community whose lives have left great heritage to the living and who continue to influence their families from beyond the visible world."[110]

To sharpen the notion of "an African ancestor" and in an attempt to delineate its relevance for the present study from a spiritual perspective, I propose the following definition: ***An African ancestor is one of those persons recognized by an African society as having, by goodness of life and admirable virtues, attained a supernatural status through death, and as being therefore entitled to the veneration of the members of that society, fit to serve them as a model and able to intercede for them before God.***

This definition incorporates the elements and functions of an African ancestor as outlined by outstanding scholars in the field.

The second area that is lacking is the development of "ancestors" from a purely Catholic African Christian theological perspective. One may naturally expect that such perspective will (a) have recognizable Afrocentric features which embrace authentic modes of African indigenous knowledge constructed within the framework of African genius and wisdom; (b) be found at the grass-roots level among ordinary members of the African societies in which the members of the society refer to their living-dead in unstructured and free-flowing languages; and (c) will reflect African epistemology and cosmology which will protect African indigenous theology and encourage the growth of such theology especially through the use of the standard pedagogical tools in Africa such as proverbs, songs, myths, and legends of the communities.

Ordinary people who live at the grass-roots level of the society are not always trained in social sciences, yet intuitively perceive the presence and action of ancestors by virtue of their

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[110] Chris Nwaka Egbulem, "African Spirituality" in Michael Downey (ed), *The New Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (Collegeville: Minnesota, 1993), 19.

being *homo Africanus* sharing the same *Weltanschauung*, that is, a comprehensive view or personal philosophy of human life and the universe. Non-academic ancestral beliefs spring spontaneously from the masses, which fortunately Vatican II has affirmed in "*supernaturalis sensus fidei totius populi*" (the supernatural sense of the faith of whole people,") namely that (1) ordinary people of God possess a sure sense of the faith because of the unique presence of God in them and (2) that unique presence of God enables tradition to progress by means of lived sense of the faith, of the teachers, and of elders.[111]

The sense of faith of the ordinary people who speak naturally about their ancestors is a belief system that is not "thought out in the agora of theology" but rather "lived out in the market place of Africa."[112] Considering the semiotic nature of culture that I have adopted for this work, I contend that Luo understanding of ancestors corresponds with their specific objectives to be achieved within their day-to-day life situations, such as solving a specific problem, curing a sick person, asking for favorable weather, and placating a particular angry spirit or spirits.

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[111] Two particular documents of the Second Vatican Council speak very positively about the ecclesial reality of *sensus fidei*: (1) *Lumen Gentium* (no. 12) asserts that the whole body of the faithful possesses a sure sense of the faith because of the anointing by the Holy Spirit; (2) *Dei Verbum* (no. 8) also evokes the anointing of the same Holy Spirit which enables the apostolic tradition to progress by means of such a lived sense of the faith, in conjunction with the work of theologians and the authoritative teaching of the magisterium. Theological literature treating its significance and relevance is abundant. Such literature generally dwells on the *sensus fidei fidelium* (the *sensus fidei* of the whole body of the faithful), or the *sensus fidei fidelis* (the *sensus fidei* belonging to the individual believer within the community of the faithful). Ormond Rush has rightly pointed out the terminological confusion that exists in the literature, namely that some authors use *sensus fidelium* and *sensus fidei* synonymously when referring to the communal sense of the faith (as in *Lumen gentium* no. 12). Others prefer instead *sensus fidei* for the sense that an individual believer has of the faith, and for the communal sense they employ the phrase *sensus fidelium.* See Ormond Rush "Sensus Fidei: Faith 'Making Sense' of Revelation", in *Theological Studies*, 62, (2001): 132. John J. Burkhard, who has studied the major international literature on the subject, submits that the concept has received impressive scholarly attention. He reckons that since 1965 until 2005 approximately 150 monographs and articles have been written on the subject. His studies include the three most notable scholars in the field: Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, Wolfgang Beinert, and Christoph Böttigheimer. See John J. Burkhard, "Sensus Fidelium" in Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge, (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, (New York; London: Routledge, 2008), 560-575. For further studies and extended bibliography, see Daniel J. Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium: The Use of a Concept in the Post-Vatican II Era* (San Francisco: International Scholars, 1996), 655–689. See also Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful & the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2009), 5.

[112] Thomas D. Blakely, et al. (eds.), *Religion in Africa* (London: James Currey, 1994), 17.

Descriptions of Luo ancestors are mostly non-academic perspectives of ordinary Luo expressing their ancestral beliefs. These perspectives are favored by some prominent Luo scholars. For example, Oruka and Masolo are inclined to see an emphasis from the theoretical to the empirical perspectives when it comes to synthesizing certain aspects of cultures and speak of it as "a way of life" rather than a fixed creed.[113] Therefore it is in the funeral rituals that we encounter the Luo ancestral institution, including their descriptions and beliefs, and the ritualization of those beliefs.

The Luo also speak of "ancestors" to refer to spirits of the deceased kin collectively. In both individual and collective senses there is a belief in, and often the propitiation of, the spirits of the dead. There is a never a ceremony or ritual for designating or promoting a deceased into the state of "ancestor." Any person who is said to have died a good death is usually recognized as an ancestor without critical consideration of the worthiness of the deceased.

In concluding this section, this study has found that African ancestors hold a special place in the religious cosmos of the African. Failure to weave their presence into the ordinary life of the African may constitute neglect or disobedience on the part of the progeny. Africans' fear that ancestors may act independently of God, sometimes even in a capricious manner, is an aspect of their belief system that should not cast African ancestors in a negative light. Saints are believed to bless and in the past were invoked to curse. There is, for example, a tradition that links Saint Barbara with thunder and fear. Stephen Gudeman tells us that during stormy weather, whenever people heard the sound of crushing thunder they exclaimed, "Ay, Saint Barbara!"[114] I shall now

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[113] Oruka and Masolo, (eds.), *Philosophy and Cultures* (Nairobi: Bookwise Ltd., 1983), 57.
[114] Stephen Gudeman, "Saints, Symbols, and Ceremonies," *American Ethnologist* 3, no. 4 (Nov., 1976): 717.

proceed to analyze ways by a parallel can be drawn between ancestral beliefs and the doctrine of Communion of Saints.

CHAPTER EIGHT

8.0 THE NECESSITY OF DRAWING PARALLELS BETWEEN AFRICAN ANCESTRAL BELIEFS AND *COMMUNIO SANCTORUM*

8.1 THE BROAD SEMANTIC RANGE OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND ANCESTOR VENERATION

8.1.1 Methodological and Terminological Clarifications

It is important to explicate the methodology and terminology needed to support the assertions in this study. There are many repeatable or recurrent themes, cultural practices, and religious beliefs of the Luo community that can also be found in other African communities. For this reason I will consistently take the emergent issues from the Luo and apply them with appropriate theoretical qualification to the larger context of sub-Saharan Africa. The basis of this methodology has been pointed out in many studies: for example Bolaji Idowu observed the remarkable number of features as well as the fact of a basic world-view which fundamentally exists in sub-Saharan African cultural traditions. He concluded that:

> A careful look through actual observation and comparative discussions with Africans from various parts of the continent, will show, first and foremost, that there is a common factor which the coined word negritude will express aptly. There is a common Africanness about the total culture and religious beliefs and practices of Africa. This common factor may be due either to the fact of diffusions or to the fact that most Africans share common origins with regard to race and customs and religious practices.[1]

Secondly, cultural ritual practices the world over have a broad semantic range. In regard to the engagement in society between the living and the living dead, that is the personal acts of

[1] Cited in Shorter, *African Christian Theology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 48.

devotion, communal performances, ways of warding off evil, and much more, "worship" and "veneration" are often not clarified. Do Africans worship or venerate their ancestors?

As a preliminary statement, the ethnological data gathered to reveal more about Luo funerals and the people's views about death, does not indicate that the Luo's attachment to their ancestors tends towards "worship." "Ancestor worship" and "ancestor veneration" are conceptually difficult subjects. Unfortunately they have often been treated casually and perfunctorily without paying attention to certain methodological disclaimers and terminological caveats. Could DuPré with her assertion that the Luo worship their ancestors be an example of certain perfunctorily expressed assertions?

Throughout history, anthropologists have long been interested in representations of the afterlife and the related beliefs and ritual practices surrounding the ancestors. Every scholar has brought his or her own methodological lens into the field. For example in the studies by Victorian anthropologists – the sociologist Herbert Spencer, cultural anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, and the anthropologist and historian of religion James Frazer – "ancestor worship" was considered as the most primitive form of religion, which indicates the simplest conception of a supernatural being.[2]

Besides these studies we consider the flurry of intense studies of African ancestors and their associated ritual activities since the beginning of 1900s which have broadened and deepened the understanding of Africans and their forebears. A particularly insightful question merits our attention. Charles Craft asks: Are Africans "who honor their ancestors breaking the first commandment ('no other gods before me') or obeying the fifth ('honor your father and

[2] For an overview of these scholars see Brian Morris's chapter "The Intellectualists: Müller, Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer" in *Anthropological Studies of Religion: An Introductory Text*, ed. Brian Morris (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 91-105.

mother')?"[3] To answer such a question, it will be helpful to examine typical African encounters with an ancestor. I argue that Africans do not worship their ancestors. Further explanation of this argument is necessary.

8.1.2 Africans do not worship their ancestor

Do African peoples worship their ancestors? This is a difficult question because of three particular points: (1) the many cultures, cultural practices, and their interpretation by various scholars; (2) the definition of "worship;" and (3)—failure to arrive at an accurate use of the term "ancestor worship."

According to the *Advanced Oxford American Dictionary*, to worship is "to show respect for God or a god, especially by saying prayers, singing, etc. with other people in a religious building."[4] This definition sounds very casual and even misleading. Simply showing respect (especially) by saying prayers and songs can be done even to ordinary human beings. That is why scholars consider ancestor "worship" in a much broader sense to include the expression of rites and beliefs performed for the deceased.

Unfortunately some authors have uncritically lumped a great variety of African traditional beliefs and practices together and referred to them as "ancestor worship." Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in his study *Primitive Mentality* painted a picture of Africans and referred to their

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[3] Charles Craft, *Christianity and Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 309. Although Craft has referred to the commandment of honoring mother and father as fifth, in this work I will refer to it as the fourth commandment as taught in the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1994), nn. 2197-2257.

[4] *Advanced Oxford American Dictionary*, c.v. "worship."

relationships with their ancestors as "a kind of ancestor worship."[5] The following passage can serve to make this point clearer:

> The dead are alive, there is no doubt of that. "What are you doing here?" asks Hahn of a Namaqua woman he meets on the veld. "My friend," she replies, "do not laugh at me. I am in distress; through the drought and the Bushmen we have lost a large number of sheep and cattle, and I am going to the grave of my father who died out hunting. I am going to weep and pray there; he will hear my voice and see my tears, and then he will assist my husband, who has gone to hunt ostriches. Then we shall be able to buy goats and cows again, and give our children something to eat" "But your father is dead" said I, "how can he hear you?" "It is true that he is dead" she answered, "but he is only sleeping. When we Hottentots are in distress we always go and pray at the graves of our relatives and ancestors; that is one of our most ancient customs."[6]

The above incident can serve to demonstrate that ancestor veneration is a dense, multi-layered phenomenon whose main component is drawing closer to the deceased for the spiritual and material benefits of the descendants. Unfortunately some notable scholars make statements about ancestor "worship" in Africa, statements which are seldom backed by a careful analysis of concrete facts.[7]

Examining the Western idea of "worship" may prove helpful. The typology of religion as a result of Western scholarship forms the Church members' idioms and experiences. Therefore "worship" conjures up words such as genuflections, prostrations, candles and incense, sacrifices, temples, altars, and so on. However, in African cultural practices, there are no such

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[5] Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), 78.

[6] Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality*, 78.

[7] Since the beginning of the 20th century a number of notable studies regarding African ancestors have appeared. Most of these studies belong to the genre of "ancestor worship." Examples include James Thayer Addison, "Ancestor Worship in Africa" in *The Harvard Theological Review*, 17, no. 2, (1924): 155-171; J. H. Drieberg, "The Secular Aspect of Ancestor-Worship in Africa," in *Journal of Royal African Society* 35, no. 138, (1936); V. Uchendu, "Ancestorcide!: Are African Ancestors Dead?" in *Ancestors*, ed., William H. Newell (The Hague, Mouton, Chicago: Aldine, 1976); Lyle B. Steadman, Craig T. Palmer and Christopher F. Tilley, "The Universality of Ancestor Worship," in *Ethnology*, 35, no. 1 (Winter, 1996): 63-76; Terrence Tatje and Francis L. K. Hsu, "Variations in Ancestor Worship Beliefs and Their Relation to Kinship," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1969): 153-172.

terminologies. Moreover, there is no structured corporate "worship" such as can be found in Western practices. There are certain communities that erect shrines for the ancestors, but even these have meanings that are completely different from those referring to Western shrines. The Lugbara, for example, erect shrines and offer sacrifices that are accompanied by intense religious emotions. But these elements of their religion, as Albert Titus Dalfovo tells us, are on the level of human relationship and do not constitute "worship" in the western sense of the word.[8]

There is no available literature that describes the so-called "ancestor worship" in detail and shows clearly how the rituals involved constitute "worship." Most of the available literature referring to "ancestor worship" is written by non-African scholars and can properly be viewed as etic statements by outsiders to an insider system, in which the outsiders have brought their own religious viewpoints and partly superimposed their observations on traditional African practices, interpreting them in reference to their outside starting point.[9] A fine example has been given by J. O. Awolalu who writes about the westerners who claimed to know African religion as "theorists who [had] never been in Africa but who regarded it as the 'Dark Continent' where people had no idea of God and where the Devil in all his abysmal, grotesque and forbidden features, armed to the teeth and with horns complete, held sway."[10]

The missionary Leo Frobenius obtained most of his knowledge of Africa from the accounts written in *The Berlin Journal Newspapers*. The journal made serious allegations in regard to African religious practices, allegations that were largely unsubstantiated, painting Africa as a place dominated by crude fetishism. Part of the journal said:

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[8] Albert Titus Dalfovo, "The Lugbara Ancestors," *Anthropos* 92, no. 4/6 (1997): 488.

[9] Kenneth Lee Pike's personal communication with author Marvin Harris, *Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times* (Walnut Creek; London; New Delhi: Altamira Press, 1999), 32.

[10] J. O. Awolalu, "What is African Traditional Religion?" *Studies in Comparative Religion* 10, no. 2. (Spring, 1976): 2.

> Before the introduction of genuine faith and higher standards of culture by the Arabs, the natives had neither political organization nor strictly speaking any religion ....Therefore, in examining the pre-Muhammadan conditions of the negro races, we will need to confine ourselves to the description of their crude fetishism, their brutal and often cannibal customs, their vulgar and repulsive idols and their squalid homes.[11]

The "vulgar and repulsive idols" might have provided an average reader with inaccurate and misleading information regarding the hold that African ancestors had on Africans before the introduction of the religious traditions from Europe and the Middle East. Even though some sympathizers argued that Africans actually believed in the one God and were therefore at par with Judeo-Christian faith, other scholars objected, arguing that such a prospect was impossible. A. C. Bouquet, for example, said, "Such a High God hardly differs from the Supreme Being of the 18th century Deists and it is absurd to equate him with the Deity of the Lord's Prayer."[12]

Such judgments will be avoided if one keeps in mind the following six points: First, the relationship between a deceased member of the community and his kin is a natural consequent of natural relationships in Africa. Hoehler-Fatton gives us an example of a prayer that reflects a typical natural relationship between a deceased and his kin. A man addressed a troublesome ancestor as follows:

> Oh *kwara maber* (my good grandfather), what do you intend to do in your home? As you know, everyone's wish is that his family (or clan) be prosperous and happy. Whenever you come here, may you identify yourself clearly. Will you please tell us frankly what you require of us. As you are our great grandfather, you can drive away bad luck and bring good luck to us. Take this sacrifice

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[11] Leo Frobenius, tr. Rodolf Blind, *The Voice of Africa: Being an Account of the Travels of the German Inner African Exploration Expedition in the Years 1910-1912*, Vol. 1 (New York: B. Blom, 1968, 1913), xll.

[12] Alan Coates Bouquet, *Man and Deity: An Outline of the Origin and Development of Religion* (Cambridge, England: W. Heffer, 1933), 103.

> together with your friends (the ancestors) so that you leave us in peace. Leave us together with good fortune.[13]

There are many more examples we could give, all of them recognizing the ancestor as a mediator. The prayer quoted above contains at least five important features of Luo ancestral beliefs that we have examined above as the functions of an ancestor, namely: (1) the ancestor is still an integral member of the community even if he may have diminished or increased his human power (as in this case he was asked to identify himself); (2) he has to have more power than humans so he can punish descendants if offended and therefore he can be punitive, benevolent, or capricious; (3) he is in the company of other ancestors where it is generally understood that his main function is to act as an intermediary; (4) he is in a higher ontological state of existence and therefore capable of bestowing goodness on the community; (5) he can protect the community from evil spirits, which feature strongly in all African communities.

We observe similar patterns in communication between the living and their ancestors in other parts of Africa. Kopytoff offers the following dialogue:

> You [such and such], your junior is ill. We do not know why, we do not know who is responsible. If it is you, if you are angry, we ask your forgiveness. If we have done wrong, pardon us. Do not let him die. Other lineages are prospering and our people are dying. Why are you doing this? Why do you not look after us properly?[14]

Second, Africans' fear of offending their ancestors is often misunderstood to be "worship." At certain times, Africans engage in practices that are meant to reconcile them with their diseased members especially by prayer and sacrifice. James George Frazer, who studied the

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[13] Hoehler-Fatton, *Women of Fire and Spirit*, 126.
[14] Kopytoff, "Ancestors as Elders in Africa", 413.

universal fear of the dead, concludes from his analysis of the Africans' relationship with their dead that uses of the words "fear" and "worship" are synonymous. He writes:

> It might suffice to give you a conception of the firm hold which the belief in immortality has on the mind of the native African, and of the deep influence it exercises on his life. Far more than the ordinary civilized man, he is occupied by thoughts of death and the dead; in the events of daily life, in good and evil fortune, he traces the handiwork of these awful beings; and to them he turns in seasons of distress and danger for help and deliverance from the troubles that beset this our mortal life here on earth. No wonder that he looks at the spirits of the departed with mingled feelings of hope and fear, of affection and abhorrence. . . in Africa, so far as it has not been affected by Europe, the living exist in perpetual bondage to the spirits of the dead.[15]

Frazer points out some of the fundamental elements in the African ancestral belief system, such as immortality and the attachment which the living have to the dead. However, Frazer fails to demonstrate how he concludes that the fear constitutes "worship." I have described by the example of the Luo how the African mind is preoccupied by the presence and influence of the ancestor, and has a natural recourse to the ancestor especially during the times of need. Such recourse does not constitute "worship" but rather expresses the desire of the living to not exclude the ancestor from the important events of life. The ancestor is present in the religious fabric of life of the ordinary people, and so pervasive and central is the presence of the ancestor that the famous cultural historian Cullen Young asserted what most scholars will agree with: "No approach to any appreciation of indigenous ideas regarding God can take any path but through the thought-area occupied by ancestors"[16]

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[15] James George Frazer, *The Fear of the Dead in Primitive Religion* (New York: Arno Press, 1977, first published 1933), 68.

[16] Cullen T. Young, "The Idea of God in Northern Nyasaland" in E. W. Smith (ed.), *The Idea of God in Africa* (London: Edinburgh House, 1950), 38.

Whatever a Luo hopes from God must first go through the ancestor. Any remarkable happening in the life of a Luo is interpreted as a purposeful event or activity that is open to the intervention of the ancestors.

Third, scholars have not always defined "ancestor worship" with the necessary critical and scientific tools that can encourage objective study of the relationship between the dead and their kin. Some scholars define "worship" so loosely that any interaction with the deceased is quickly and uncritically labeled as "worship."[17] Some authors on the other hand define it so narrowly that scientific study of alleged ancestor worship becomes impossible to achieve. Some distinguish ancestor veneration in a social plane from ancestor worship in a religious plane.[18] Bolaji Idowu asserts:

> Those who are chronically addicted to 'ancestor worship' as the religion in Africa or hold categorically that Africans *worship* their ancestors are victims of theory-fulfillment. Very often they are taking appearance for reality or are arguing exclusively from one particular angle of a rather complex phenomenon.[19]

Fourth, the transcendence and immanence of God in African traditional religions has often been misunderstood as the absence of God and worship of ancestors in its place, whereas according to Omosade Awolalu and Adelumo Dopamu these are two divine attributes that are "paradoxically complementary."[20] The African spiritual mind recognizes the existence of one

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[17] Apart from the examples of authors who refer to "ancestor worship" rather than "ancestor veneration," examples of authors who maintain that ancestor veneration is an idolatrous practice include Helen Hardacre, "Ancestor Worship" in *Encyclopedia of Religion,* Vol. 1 ed., Mircea Eliade (New York: McMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 263-268; Jane Dawnhee and Roger L. Janelli, *Ancestor Worship in Korean Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1982); Roman Malek, "Ancestor Worship 1 (General)" in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives* ed., Karl Müller SVD, Stephen Bevan, and Theo Sundermeier (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 17-22; and Horst Balts "Ancestor Worship II (in Africa)" in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*.

[18] See for example Choon Sup Bae, "Ancestor Worship in Korea and Africa: Social Function or Religious Phenomenon?" *Verbum et Ecclesia* 25, no. 2 (2004): 354.

[19] Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 182.

[20] J. Omosade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje, 1979), 50.

God as a transcendental Being, who is believed to be the creator and sustainer of the world and of mankind, and who is beyond the limitations of time, space, and necessity. Spirits and ancestors are the myriads of hierarchically structured beings that act as intermediaries and mediators with the human beings. Therefore in day-to-day life, God is not seen as the focus of all attention. The intermediaries and mediators attract more attention due to their proximity with the human folk. Mbiti explains the dynamics of God's simultaneous transcendence and immanence:

> For most of their life, African people place God in the transcendental plane, making him seem remote from their daily affairs. But they know that he is immanent . . . The distinction between these related attributes could be stated that, in theory transcendent, but in practice He is immanent.[21]

Fifth, there is often a hasty generalization made from observations about small sections of Africa. Choon Sup Bae, for example, depends heavily on A. Anderson's study "African Pentecostalism and the Ancestor Cult: Confrontation or Compromise?" which was conducted in Pretoria, South Africa.[22] Bae's study has many inaccuracies; for example, he wrongly claims that Mbiti coined the phrase "living dead" in reference to ancestors. As a matter of fact Mbiti did not coin that phrase, Lévy-Bruhl already used it in his *Primitive Mentality* in 1923, long before Mbiti was born.[23] Among other things Bae asserts in limited research that Africans' fear of ancestors interferes with the liberation offered by Jesus Christ and that ancestors cannot replace the "intermediary role reserved for the Holy Spirit," which is yet another point of weakness of the study: we pray *in* the Holy Spirit and not *through* the Holy Spirit. Bae concludes that ancestor

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[21] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 33.

[22] Anderson, A 1993. African Pentecostalism and the Ancestor Cult: Confrontation or Compromise? *Missionalia* 21(1), 26-39.

[23] Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality* (tr. Lilian A. Clare) (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), 78.

"worship" ought to be viewed as idol worship,[24] which is potentially misleading. Dr. Kuper, who is more familiar with the Southern Africa religious practices, tells us that:

> Ancestral spirits are not worshipped. Swazi address them in much the same way as the living, and the word *tsetisa* (to scold) is frequently used to describe the manner of approach. Swazi rarely express gratitude when they think the ancestors are blessing them, and they are more indignant than humble when they find they are being punished. . .[25]

A look into the manner in which certain Western African regions especially in Benin, Ghana, and Nigeria interact with their ancestors is also worthwhile. In these regions, the cult of the ancestors is more deeply rooted in the cultures than in the cultures of Eastern Africa.[26] One of the features of these Western African regions is "deification" which is portrayed well in Mariasusai Dhavamony's succinct definition of "ancestor worship": "as a set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices connected with the deified deceased persons in a community, particularly the dead within a kinship grouping."[27] Dhavamony tells us that some of the dead are deified and recognized as deities who are approached in order to supply the needs of the living. We have already seen this with the deification of Nyikang. Perhaps rather than refer to such practices which would blur the distinctions between veneration and worship, it may suffice to look at them simply as a collective memory of an outstanding ancestor who is mystically linked to other ancestors with special spiritual attributes, a memory which has strong religious connotations. Idowu describes such practices as follows:

> The apotheosis of certain ancestors is an indisputable fact all over Africa. It must be observed, however, that in almost every case, an ancestor became a divinity

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[24] Bae, "Ancestor worship in Korea and Africa," 338-352.
[25] Cited in Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 182.
[26] John Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," *Sociological Analysis*, 37, no. 1 (Spring, 1976): 1.
[27] Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Jesus Christ in the Understanding of World Religions* (Documenta Missionalia 30) (Roma, Italia: Editrice Pontifica Universita Gregoriana, 2004), 32.

> only by absorbing the attributes of an original divinity. There is usually a foundation cult with which the strong person had been closely associated.[28]

But memory is not peculiar to western Africa. The Roman Senate declared Augustus Caesar to be a god after his death in the year 14 AD. In the civilizations of Asia, the classic examples of ancestor worship in China and Japan are well-known.[29] But here again there is no uniform belief about the deification of the dead and subsequent veneration or worship accorded them. While some authors such as Durkheim maintain that "by itself, death has no deifying virtue" other scholars such as Junod assert that "death is both the necessary and the sufficient condition for attaining "deification" as an ancestor spirit."[30] Moreover, while some scholars believe that an ancestor can be both worshipped and venerated even if not as a God, others are categorical that ancestors are venerated and not worshipped.[31] The English anthropologist Wilfrid D. Hambly, who was a curator at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago from 1926 until 1944, concluded from his study of the various African regions that:

> Supreme gods are somewhat otiose, yet an exception must be made with regard to some areas of west Africa. In parts of the Ivory Coast, Ashanti, Dahomey, and certain regions of Nigeria a god-concept is clearly defined. The supreme deity, together with a hierarchy of lesser gods, has definite functions, and a tangible recognition in sacrifice and prayer. These are lacking among Bantu Negroes in their concept of Nzambi and Karunga. Whether this local development of functional theism has resulted from an importation of ideas, or whether the theology is indigenous, is uncertain; but the special aspects of the religion are clear.[32]

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[28] Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 186.

[29] June-Ann Greely, "Apotheosis" in *Holy People of the World: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, ed. Phyllis G. Jestice (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 65.

[30] Cited in Meyer Fortes, *Religion, Morality, and the Person: Essays on Tallensi Religion* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1987), 68.

[31] Mwalimu J. Shujaa, "Rituals" in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals and Festivals* ed. Frank A. Salamone (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2004, 2011), 578.

[32] Wilfrid Dyson Hambly, *Source Book for African Anthropology Part II* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1968 [Reprint of the 2nd vol. 1937 ed. published by the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago]), 548.

In the light of these views, perhaps we conclude that there is no universally accepted understanding of "worship" and "veneration." A basic axiom can perhaps be stated from the evidence of these views, that even when deification occurs the deified human does not replace God, the Supreme Being. What appears as the worship of gods rather than God is actually a recognition of the myriads of the lesser gods who have definite functions in the African cosmology. Many scholars who have studied West African cosmologies agree that the place of God is not confused with the gods.

> The Igbo of Nigeria call God by these names *Chukwu* meaning "Source Being" which connotes "the Great One from whom being originates". *Chineke* meaning, "The Source Being Who creates all things". The Edo of Nigeria knows God as *Osanobua* or *Osanobwa* which means "the source of all beings who carries and sustains the world or universe". Among the *Nupe* of Nigeria God is called *Soko* which means "the creator or supreme deity that resides in heaven."[33]

One may argue that in Africa, although the manner in which ancestor beliefs are concretized in a specific cultural and ethnic region may be different, what makes ancestors central to the life of the community is the sense of community, communion, solidarity and representation. Oso says it well: "what has been called the ancestor worship is only a means of communion and communication with those already departed from earth."[34]

Sixth, many African indigenous arts and artifacts have been misunderstood and their importance underestimated. Little attention is usually paid to the contextual functions of African arts and artifacts, consequently many simply refer to them as fetishes. The art anthropologist Robert Layton, for example, considered African art as fetishes and excluded them from the

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[33] C. Emeka Ekeke and Chike A. Ekeopara, "God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology," *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2010): 210.

[34] S. O. Oso, *Lectures on West African Traditional Religion* (Ado-Ekiti: Barnig Boye & Co. Press Nigeria Ltd., 1979), 37.

artistic visual representations,[35] although as Wyatt Macgaffey writes in the journal of *African Arts*, reputable museums think favorably of the same art work.[36] Misunderstanding and disparaging African art work has a long history. Macgaffey writes that

> Fetishes were certainly not art at the turn of the century; they have become so only in the last decade or two. . . .It is argued that the force emanating from some African objects is so disturbing that in the sixteenth century it was thought necessary to burn them because they were too uncomfortably suggestive of the Devil; graven images subverted the authority of the word of God.[37]

What is referred to as "fetishes" is in fact some of the spiritual aspects that make African art conceptually different from Western art in style and content or subject matter. It reflects the religiosity of the societies that produce it, inspired by the concept of immediacy of practical needs while exploring the richness of cultures, and uniquely asserts the creative independence of the individual artists. Choon Sup Bae laments that African religiosity has often been regarded as irrational beliefs in magic, fetishes, and spirits.[38] Some of the most common arts and artifacts include masks of power figures, dance staffs, and sculptures of fertility figures. Unfortunately the symbolic values and aesthetic qualities of such African arts has not been fully appreciated. Particularly, their spiritual connection to ancestors is seldom known to curious onlookers. Jean-Marc Éla explains the values of statues and masks, highlighting their spiritual function to dramatize the presence of ancestors, who he submits are not worshipped. Éla writes:

> African art serves the cult of the ancestors; well known is the role of the statues and masks in the great majority of African societies. We now understand that these objects are not "fetishes," as collectors of exotic art first led Europeans to

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[35] Robert Layton, *The Anthropology of Art*, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 6.

[36] Wyatt Macgaffey, "'Magic, or as We Usually Say, Art:' A Framework For Comparing European and African Art," in *The Scramble For Art in Africa*, eds. Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 223.

[37] Macgaffey, "'Magic, or as We Usually Say, Art,'" 223.

[38] Choon Sup Bae, *Ancestor Worship and the Challenges it Poses to the Christian Mission and Ministry* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pretoria, South Africa, 2007), 44.

> believe. Statues and masks are representations on a human and not a divine level of the spiritual presence of ancestors. They are not worshipped. [39]

Mbiti's emphatic statement serves as an apt summery to this argument:

> Africans do not worship their departed relatives. It is true that departed relatives continue to live and to show their interests in their surviving families. These families may show their belief by building shrines for the departed and placing bits of food or drink there or on the graves, and sometimes mentioning them in prayers. But these acts of respect for the departed do not amount to worshipping them; they show people's belief that the departed of up to four or five generations should not be forgotten.[40]

Mbiti highlights the rituals that are consistent with the analysis we have made in regard to the functions of ancestors. It is the spiritual responsibility of the living to build shrines for their ancestors, offer libation, and mention them at prayer. All these are acts of honor and not worship. Elsewhere Mbiti states categorically that:

> The departed, whether parents, brothers, sisters or children, form part of the family, and must therefore be kept in touch with their surviving relatives. Libation and giving of food to the departed are tokens of fellowship, hospitality and respect; the drink and food so given are symbols of family continuity and contact. "Worship" is the wrong word to apply in this situation; and Africans themselves know very well that they are not "worshipping" the departed members of their family.[41]

A hasty qualification of the expression "ancestor worship" in Africa is, to borrow Joseph Goebbels' insight, to perpetuate a lie that has been repeated many times which in time began to sound like truth.[42] For it is not true that Africans worship their ancestors but rather some authors claim that Africans worship their ancestors. Such authors authenticate Maurice Bloch's

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[39] Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African*, tr. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books; London, U.K.: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988), 15.

[40] Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 18.

[41] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 9.

[42] Joseph Goebbels, *Die Zeit ohne Beispiel* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1941), 364-369. It seems Adolf Hitler used this insight before Goebbels as illustrated in James Murphy's translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (London: Hurst and Blackett; Los Angeles: Angriff Press, 1981, c1942), 134.

observation of the "professional malpractice of anthropologists to exaggerate the exotic character of other cultures"[43] and which Lyle Steadman and others claim is "detrimental to the study of cultural universals."[44] Magesa offers a statement that best summarizes my position on "ancestor worship" and that may serve to conclude it:

> God forms the background, or, rather, the ambience of every act of worship and every ritual. Ultimately God is the recipient of every sacrifice, offering or libation. But the most immediate beings to whom the mind and attention are focused at times of prayer are the spiritual powers under God, notably, the ancestors.[45]

8.1.3 Africans venerate their ancestors

In spite of the close ritual practices involved, there are scholars who are keen enough to keep the differences between "worship" and "veneration" apart in relation to the rituals of piety directed toward the ancestors. Other scholars such as Ian Morris have argued that ancestor veneration should be distinguished from mortuary rituals,[46] an argument that does not make sense because mortuary rituals are an integral part of death. Other scholars such as Meyer Fortes have suggested that ancestor veneration should be distinguished from the general consideration of the dead.[47] Again, we can not separate ancestor veneration from the general consideration of the dead because it is some of the dead who become ancestors. Therefore I submit that funerary practices and the general consideration of the dead are intrinsically connected to veneration of ancestors. George F. Lau, although writing from outside of Africa, is clear on this point:

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[43] Maurice Bloch, "The Past and the Present in the Present," *Man* 12, (1977): 278-92.

[44] Lyle B. Steadman, Craig T. Palmer and Christopher F. Tilley, "The Universality of Ancestor Worship," *Ethnology*, 35, no. 1 (Winter, 1996): 63.

[45] Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion in the Dialogue Debate: From Intolerance to Coexistence* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 59.

[46] Ian Morris, "The Archaeology of Ancestors: The Saxe/Goldstein Hypothesis Revisited," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 1, (1991): 147-69.

[47] Meyer Fortes, Some Reflections on Ancestor Worship in Africa," in *African Systems of Thought*, eds., Meyer Fortes and Germaine Dieterlen (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 122-142.

> Ancestor veneration often entails ceremonial practices that may include but also extend beyond interment and funerary rites. The practices center on the notion that specific progenitors, after death, possess supernatural capabilities that continue to directly affect the living descendants. The descendants venerate their ancestors to enable supernatural favor (e.g., success in warfare or production) or to stay misfortune and sickness.[48]

Scholars who speak of "veneration" rather than "worship" take into consideration the African cultural and religious sensibilities in regard to their relationship with their ancestors and refer to the cultural and religious practices involved as "ancestor veneration."[49] Awolalu identifies famous examples of missionaries and explorers such as T. B. Freeman, T. J. Bowen, R. H. Stone, N. Baudin, R. F. Burton, and T. J. Hutchinson who studied African religion and began a type of scholarship that moved away from western racial intellectual pride and prejudice.[50] The basic arguments of these scholars are echoed in the insights of the Austrian linguist, anthropologist, and ethnologist Wilhelm Schmidt, who explained his theory of monotheism from his monumental study published in the 12-volume *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*.[51] Schmidt argued that all African cultures originally acknowledge only one Supreme Deity, a God who was the First Cause of all things and Ruler of Heaven and Earth and that the belief is not a late

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[48] George F. Lau, "Feasting and Ancestor Veneration at Chinchawas, North Highlands of Ancash, Peru," in *Latin American Antiquity*, 13, no. 3 (Sep., 2002): 281.

[49] Examples of this genre of studies include N. K. Dzobo N.K., "African Ancestor Cult: A theological Appraisal," *Reformed World* 38 (1985): 333-340; Igor Kopytoff, "Ancestors as Elders in Africa" *The Harvard Theological Review* 17, no. 2 (1924): 155-171; Edward W. Fasholé-Luke "Ancestor Veneration and the Communion of Saints" in *New Testament Christianity For Africa and The World*, eds. Mark E. Glasswell and Edward Fashole-Luke, (London: SPCK, 1974), 209-221; B. Afeke and P. Verster, "Christianization of Ancestor Veneration Within African Tradition Religions: an Evaluation," in *In die Skriflig* 38, no. 1 (2004): 47–61; E. Clarke, "The Sociological Significance of Ancestor Worship in Ashante," *Africa* 3 (1930); Hans Witte, *Earth and the Ancestors*: *Ogboni Iconography* (Amsterdam: Gallery Ballu, 1988). Most of the studies of the genre have been published in journals and as articles; no major study has appeared in book form as an independent volume. They have shown that there is a relationship between "ancestral cults" and social structure.

[50] Awolalu, "What is African Traditional Religion?" 4.

[51] Wilhelm von Schmidt, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee: Eine Historisch-Kritische und Positive Studie* (Münster i. W.: Aschendorff, 1926).

development or traceable to missionary influences.[52] Schmidt's contribution on the primacy of monotheism is the most substantial in his works *The Origin and Growth of Religion* and *The Origin of the Idea of God* (1935). Evans-Pritchard in his study *Theories of Primitive Religion* comes to conclusions that are essentially similar to Wilhelm Schmidt.

> The belief in, and worship of, one supreme deity is universal among all really primitive peoples—the high God is found among them all, not indeed everywhere in the same form or with the same vigour, but still everywhere prominently enough to make his dominant position indubitable. He is by no means a late development or traceable to Christian missionary influences.[53]

If African traditional religious practices belong to the category of the so-called "primitive" peoples, then Schmidt's argument helps to support the view that Africans were as monotheistic as the Christians. As demonstrated by the Luo cultural practices, we conclude that the Luo do not worship their ancestors but rather venerate them.

African ancestral veneration must not be confused with worshiping the deceased members of African societies. Veneration of ancestors consists primarily of acts of honouring and loving certain deceased members of the society whose spirits survive after their corporal death and continue to live and engage in an enduring communion with their living kin. These acts differ from Western notions of respect and authority. As I analyzed above in the example of Luo elders, recognition of Luo ancestors is a hierarchical construction of respect where respect is usually associated with equality and underlies and enables licence and intimacy between the deceased and their descendants.

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[52] Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1994), 3.

[53] Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985, c1965), 103ff. There are other scholars who have argued this position including Voltaire, Andrew Lang, and Wilhelm Schmidt. Voltaire, for example, argued in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1962) that man began by knowing a single God and that it was as a result of human weakness that mankind subsequently adopted many gods. In his own argument in support of monotheism, Andrew Lang insisted that among the primitive people there was a definite knowledge of God, an indigenous knowledge.

While we labor to contrast veneration from 'worship,' it is important to keep in mind that the two are close. Idowu explains that

> Worship and veneration . . . are psychologically closer than next door to each other: the emotional indicator is always trembling between the two, swinging to the one or the other in accordance with the emotional pressure of the spiritual climate of the moment. This is something that happens anywhere, everywhere, in the world, and with peoples at every level of development.[54]

"Worship" and "veneration" are "closer" in the Christian mind as well. Hippolyte Delehaye tells us that there was no essential difference between the veneration of the saints of the Church and the heroes of Greek polytheism.[55] An example from the liturgical practice is in order. During the celebration of the Eucharist, a minister incenses the altar and the Eucharistic gifts and the liturgical assembly. While the act of incensing is essentially the same for the Eucharistic table and for the liturgical assembly, the purpose of incensing and the symbolic value is different. For the altar, the smoke symbolizes purification and sanctification of the gifts on it; while smoke that is directed to the liturgical assembly symbolizes the prayers of the faithful drifting up to heaven.[56] Incensing both the altar and the people may be categorized as a prayerful act (veneration or worship); the correct distinction is made by the worshippers who understand the intentions of these liturgical acts.

Just as there were misconceptions in regard to the veneration of saints in the early Church, we see that there are misconceptions in the veneration of African ancestors. And just as Christian teachers had to labor to explain to non-believers and provide believers with clear

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[54] Idowu, *Afrian Traditional Religion*, 182.

[55] Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography (1907)* (tr. V. M. Crawford) (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961), 160.

[56] See *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 173. See also Edward Foley et al., eds., *A Commentary on the Order of Mass of the Roman Missal: A new English Translation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2011), 207 and Matthew D. Herrera, *Holy Smoke: The Use of Incense in the Catholic Church* (San Luis Obispo, C.A.: Tixlini Scriptorum, Inc., 2011).

guidelines that distinguished the veneration that was given to saints (*dulia*) and the worship that was directed to God (*latria*), it is now important for such distinctions to be made in the light of the veneration of African ancestors.

When we make the clear distinction between "worship" and "veneration" as two separate forms of religious piety, we may respond to Craft's question (above). Africans honor the fourth commandment (by honouring their ancestors) and do not break the first commandment (worship other gods).

African communities who revere their dead are similar to those Chinese communities where cultural practices of revering their dead are filial piety. Perhaps it is Matteo Ricci who describes best the Chinese filial piety, casting it against the background of veneration rather than worship:

> The most solemn thing among the *literati* and in use from the king down to the very least being is the offering they annually make to the dead at certain times of the year of meat, fruit, perfumes, and pieces of silk cloth – paper among the poorest – and incense. And in this act they make the fulfilment of their duty to their relatives, namely, "to serve them in death as though they were alive." Nor do they think in this matter that the dead will come to eat the things mentioned or that they might need them; but they say they do this because they know of no other way to show their love and grateful spirit toward them [the dead]. And some of them told us that this ceremony was begun more for the living than for the dead, that is, to teach children and the ignorant ones to honor and serve their living relatives, since they [the children] see serious people doing the offices for the relatives after their deaths that they were wont to do to them when they [the relatives] were alive. And since they do not recognize any divinity in these dead ones, nor do they ask or hope for anything from them, all this stands outside of idolatry, and also one can say there is probably no superstition, although it will be better for the souls of these dead ones, if they are Christians, to change this into almsgiving to the poor.[57]

[57] Fonti Ricciane, *Storia dell'introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina scritta da Matteo Ricci S.I.*, ed. Pasquale M. D'Elia (Rome: La Libreria dello Stato, 1942-1949) vol. 1, 177 cited in Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy From Its Beginning to Modern Times*, 17-18.

The Chinese practices according to Ricci best summarize the African cultural practices of the living toward their dead. The living intend to serve the dead in death as though they were still alive. Although the living are aware that the dead will not come to actually eat the libations poured for them, it is their means of showing their love and gratitude toward the dead. Moreover, as in the case of the Chinese who are simply carrying out cultural traditions handed down to them for their benefit, the African communities remain faithful to the traditions and hand them down for the sake of continuity and the livelihood of the various communities.

8.1.4 A closer look at veneration of ancestors and *communio sanctorum*

A practical question may be posed as follows: must a Luo abandon his native spirituality shaped to a large extent by his indigenous spiritual worldview and thereby relinquish his innate heritage and adopt the new theological and spiritual frames of reference introduced by the missionaries?

This question points at the prospect of considering the veneration of African ancestors as a preamble to *sanctorum communio* and then drawing parallels between the two traditions. The process is an exercise of inculturation, which as Ary Roest Crollius writes, is:

> The integration of the Christian experience of a local church into the culture of its people, in such a way that this experience not only expresses itself in elements of this culture, but also becomes a force that animates, orients and renews this culture, creating a new unity and communion, not only within the culture in question but also as an enrichment of the Church universal.[58]

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[58] Ary Roest Crollius, "Inculturation: Newness and Ongoing Process" in *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency* eds., John Mary Waliggo et al. (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications, 1986), 43. Because of the diversity of views in regard to the theory and practice of inculturation, this study incorporates the understanding of "inculturation" as advanced by certain notable scholars, for example Shorter's definition: "the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures." See Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 11.

The theory and practice of inculturation is unavoidable in this study because the main objective of the study is to discover the ways in which *communio sanctorum* can, as Dennis Doyle rightly states, "have the greatest possible impact" on [the African] cultural situation while preserving what is good in [African] culture." Dennis

The question that occupies us at this point is: how can the *communio sanctorum* express itself in the elements of the Luo and other African cultures and become a force that animates, orients, and renews the cultures? Furthermore, how can *communio sanctorum* create a new unity and communion in such as a way that it is enriched by the African cultures?

In responding to these questions it will be argued that it is possible to consider ancestor veneration as a preparation to *communio sanctorum* and then draw parallels between the two spiritual institutions. In other words, it is possible for a Luo Christian to remain faithful to his traditional ancestral beliefs and practices and at the same time be a faithful Christian who enriches Christianity with his cultural traditions. This is the product of inculturation as outlined above. It has three major implications, namely (1) the element of a reciprocal relationship whereby Christianity and culture enter into a mutual and honest dialogue; (2) the modification and adjustment of cultural elements in order to encourage an integration of values, practices and institutions; and (3) the parties involved in the process of interaction and integration retain their identity so that Christianity is not reduced to a mere component of a local culture and a local culture is not stifled or exterminated by the emissaries of Christianity. These implications will ensure that we come up with a contextual theology.

Doyle, "Inculturation and the Interpretation of Vatican II in Recent Papal Documents," cited in Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 50.

I am aware that several other terms such as "contextualization," "adaptation," and "indigenization" have meanings which overlap with "inculturation" to a greater or lesser extent. In this study I prefer to use "inculturation" mainly and use other terms as well where necessary. Scholars have their preferences. Bevans, for example, prefers the "anthropological model" to "inculturation," I find the anthropological model that he expounds very useful because of "the value and goodness of *anthropos*" and "its ability to use insights of social sciences" he describes. However, I consider both "anthropological" and "inculturation" appropriate theoretical tools for this study. See Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 55. However, not to apply "inculturation" might limit my ability to achieve the objectives of this study.

Where does a contextual theology begin? Schreiter answers that it should begin with a "long and careful listening to a culture to discover its principal values, needs, interests, directions, and symbols."[59] Schreiter adds further that it involves engaging in "a semiotic study of culture, reading the culture texts, to discern the signs, codes, and messages in the sign systems."[60] To a large extent I have followed these recommendations that Schreiter proposes for a contextual theology in studying the Luo funeral rituals and the consequent beliefs and practices of ancestor veneration. In moving forward I incorporate Peter Schineller's insights. Schineller complements Schreiter by proposing the analysis of the cultural situation as the first step.[61] Schineller goes further to propose that the process becomes a continual movement around the pastoral cycle of analysis, examination of the biblical text and the Church tradition, and reflection of one's own experience.[62] From the foregoing, we have established that the Luo and indeed the African cultural religious worldview lies not in dogmatic constructs or philosophically and theologically formulated doctrines, but rather finds its expression in the lives of people. That religious worldview works hand in hand with Luo value system and is related to other key concepts of Luo life, including those of morality, politics, and social organization. That is why Éla warns that "in black Africa, belief in the ancestors is so closely linked with numerous aspects of traditional society that its abandonment will provoke widespread social crisis."[63]

The next question is to identify the numerous aspects of the traditional society to which ancestors are closely linked. It will be shown that those aspects prove to be important connecting

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[59] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 28.
[60] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 78.
[61] Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 75.
[62] Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, 75.
[63] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 25.

points between African ancestors and the *communio sanctorum*, the foundations for drawing parallels between ancestors and *communio sanctorum*.

8.2 FOUNDATIONS FOR DRAWING PARALLELS BETWEEN AFRICAN ANCESTORS AND THE DOCTRINE OF COMMUNION OF SAINTS

8.2.1 Cultural foundations

Gerald Arbuckle has pointed out that some postmodern anthropologists are so dissatisfied with the modern understanding of culture that they wish to drop the word "culture" entirely in their research and writings.[64] Arbuckle himself comes to the conclusion that "there is simply no other word to take its place" and concludes that its fate will depend on its uses.[65]

The use of "culture" in this study is unavoidable and its consideration as the first foundation for the systematic engagement between ancestors and saints is extremely important. As I described above, the understanding of culture that I apply in this study is the semiotic one advanced by Geertz, whereby the culture is people's verbal and nonverbal messages that circulate along elaborate, interconnected pathways, which, together, create systems of meaning. Furthermore, it is fitting that I incorporate Bevans' suggestion to work out of an empirical notion of culture, rather than a classicist one.[66] An empirical notion of culture will ensure that we consider culture as the first foundation for the drawing parallels between African ancestors and *communio sanctorum*.

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[64] Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), 16.

[65] Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians*, 16-17.

[66] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 11.

The use of "culture" in the present study of ancestor beliefs is, however, also integrated with other cultural practices such as birth, naming, initiation, and marriage. Having described and analyzed the creative, material, institutional and religious aspects of Luo funeral rites, and having considered the distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of the Luo society, it is logical to consider culture as a firm foundation for contextual ancestral theology. Such a consideration will help in

> determining independencies as interconnection, gulfs as well as bridges. The appropriate image, if one must have images, of cultural organization, is neither the spider web nor the pile of sand. It is rather more the octopus, whose tentacles are in large part separately integrated, neurally quite poorly connected with one another and with what in the octopus passes for a brain, and yet who nonetheless manages to get around and to preserve himself, for a while anyway, as a viable, if somewhat ungainly entity.[67]

A consideration of culture will encourage a contextualized ancestral theology that takes into consideration the rituals and symbols that constitute the peculiarity of the African contexts. Mbiti points out correctly that if Africans

> cannot honour their ancestors through pouring of libation, when they cannot worship God through sacred dances, when they are not able to invoke God's power of healing during worship, they must surely feel spiritually emasculated.[68]

African cultural practices, including libations, dances, and other rituals, are what Rahner would call "explicitly religious activities directed to God in prayer and in metaphysical reflection"[69] which make explicit for persons what they already know implicitly for themselves in the depths of their personal realization.

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[67] Geertz, *Person, Time and Conduct in Bali: An Essay in Cultural Analysis*, Department of Southeast Asia Studies (New-Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 66-67. Reprinted in his *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 360-411.

[68] Mbiti, *The Crisis of Mission* (Mukono: Uganda Church Press, 1971), 1.

[69] Karl Rahner (tr. William V. Dych), *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 53.

Moreover, such a consideration, as Geertz writes, exposes the "normalness without reducing their particularity . . . setting them in the frame of their own banalities and dissolves their opacity."[70] The Luo funeral rituals, for example, may appear to be extraordinary and spectacular cultural practices to a Westerner. However, an emic analysis leads us to see them as natural practices to be performed to mark a key transition from life to death, leading a community member to cross an important and permanent threshold. The Luo is naturally sensitive to his indigenous ways of thinking and feeling in order to perform the funeral rituals.

As has been expressed by many observers, very often the conversion of Africans is only skin deep.[71] Although people may claim to be good Christians,

> When the first glow of grace fades and the newly baptized parent has a dying son in his arms; when no prayer evokes the necessary inward faith in religion and no amount of penicillin seems to herald a recovery, then the temptation to consult the nearest diviner and offer the bull to the dead assumes a form of an ultimatum yielding which, for a time, casts no shadow on a Christian conscience. That is not hypocrisy.[72]

Dr. Kipkorir's observation of the 1940s (described above as the missionary cultural imperialism and Westerners who looked down upon African indigenous cultures) may aptly exemplify the general tone of the western world toward African cultures. Such writings offer a conceptual basis and empirical evidence in support of the fact that emissaries of Christianity disparaged the cultures that came into contact with Christianity. Perhaps it would be more accurate to consider these voices as highlighting the critical issues of race and supposed Western cultural superiority. The fact that the Luo cling tenaciously to their traditional religious beliefs

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[70] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 14.

[71] For example Teresa Okure in the previous chapter. To that observation we can add Idowu's verdict of Africans who practice other religions other than their own African indigenous religious practices: "It appears that those who outwardly profess in other religions but are constantly resorting to the traditional religion for succor may not decrease substantially in numbers for a long time to come." Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 208.

[72] T. O. Ranger and I. N. Kimambo, eds., *The Historical Study of African Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 133.

and customs and are reluctant to give them up in favour of Christianity is a strong indication that their culture is an important vehicle through which any meaningful theological discourse must pass. Luo cultural practices are a product of the convergence of both visible factors and acquired practices of interpreting the world which provides them with a means of interpreting the world around and beyond them. Dismissing African cultures as heathenism and refusal to enter into a dialogue with them may lead to a cultural domination such as was described by Harry Johnston, the British explorer who was very active in the scramble for Africa. He wrote in the 1920s in the *Backward Peoples and Our Relations With Them*: "The situation in the world of 1920 is that 283,000,000 of Christian white people,—British, French, Belgium, Dutch, American . . . are directly or indirectly trying to control 920,000,000 Chinese, Tibetans, Indians . . . and Negros."[73]

Some scholars have observed how the church sought to render itself universal by disparaging African cultures.[74] One may argue that informal cultural injustices by the western missionaries are to a great extent a byproduct of the formal injustices by a Roman Catholic Church that failed to uphold culturally sensitive means of evangelization. It was the Church's systemic failure that led to the missionaries' cultural insensitivity. In order to face and overcome such attitudes of western superiority that looked down on African traditional practices, there must be a complete break with the past demonstrated by a sharp change in attitude.

Duraisamy Amalorpavadass, for example, expresses the view of many when he says that "Christianity has projected a bad image of itself in the course of its missionary enterprise during the last five centuries. The acceptance of the gospel and the expression of the Christian faith

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[73] Harry Johnston, *The Backward Peoples and Our Relations With Them* (London, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Oxford University Press), 19120.

[74] Éla, *African Cry*, 9.

meant that the converts and the young Churches of these countries also adopt the cultures of the missionaries and the mission churches."[75]

Legio Maria Church as a typical indigenous Luo Church stressed the need to sever links with the mission church and Western culture while at the same time remaining within the Roman Catholic Church. Legio represents an important example. The protest and hybridity that emerged in the African post-colonial religious environment, at times laden with cultural peculiarities, tended to advocate the rejection of certain Western standards of religion and worship. At the same time there was a cultural imitation by Legio in its quest to establish itself as a local church. We have a sense of the desire by local people to not only embrace Christianity but certain cultural elements in Christianity as well.

The task ahead of us is therefore to consider how inculturation can result in an effective evangelization and deepening of the Christian faith, all the while appreciating the cultural and religious values inherent in the beliefs and practices of African peoples.[76] Indeed many scholars have pointed out the significance of the study of culture and inculturation. A good practice of inculturation takes into account many aspects of the societies which, according to Bujo, Jean-Marc Éla called for, namely,

> an African theology that incorporates oral culture, myths, symbols, etc. into its method and into the proclamation of the Gospel. For our theologian it is evident that his inculturating effort cannot be undertaken without taking into account liberation in a holistic sense, i.e. one that takes into account cultural identity and the political and socio-economic dimensions... For Jean-Marc Éla, liberation and inculturation do not oppose each other. They ought to be placed in a relation of

[75] Duraisamy Amalorpavadass, "Evangelization and Culture" in *Evangelization in the World Today* eds. Nobert Greinacher and Alois Muller (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 61.

[76] Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, 8.

> 'perichoresis' for an African theology that takes into account each and every person.[77]

By considering culture as a foundation for the engagement between African ancestors and the Communion of Saints, we begin from where the Africans are culturally. We begin by recognizing that any Christian theology that has to take root among the Luo and indeed in Africa must necessarily begin from what the Luo already know: veneration of African ancestors leads to what they are embracing – Communion of Saints. That is why it is important to heed Robertson Smith's warning:

> No positive religion that has moved man has been able to start with a tabula rasa, and express itself as if religion were beginning for the first time, in form, if not in substance. The new system must be in contact all along the line with the older ideas and practices which it finds in possession. A new scheme of faith can find a hearing only by appealing to religious instincts and susceptibilities that already exist; and it cannot reach these without taking account of the traditional forms in which all religious feeling is embodied, and without speaking a language which men accustomed to these old forms can understand.[78]

The "new scheme of faith," that is, the Communion of Saints, definitely finds a hearing by appealing to the African attachment to their ancestors. Furthermore, that new scheme of faith calls our attention to two very important areas of consideration. First, we must look into ways by which the dynamic process of inculturation can take place. Such a process will "facilitate the Christian experience of God within and through the instrumentality of the culture."[79]

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[77] Bujo and Juvenal Ilunga Muya, *African Theology in the 21st Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers, Volume 2* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2003), 212.

[78] W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 2. (This volume was first published in 1889 as the first series of the Smith's "Lectures on the religion of the Semites" as *Burnett lectures*, Aberdeen University, 1888-89.)

[79] José M. de Mesa, "Inculturation as Pilgrimage" in *Mission and Culture: The Louis J. Luzbetak Lectures*, ed. Stephen B. Bevans (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 23.

Secondly, that new scheme of faith leads us to ask: how can Africans' way of worship reflect what they believe and eventually determine how they will live? We shall respond to this second question below by looking at the classic adage "*lex orandi lex credendi*."

8.2.2 Magisterial foundations

There are clear indicators that the extraordinary magisterium of the pope and of the bishops has demonstrated a remarkable openness in developing the Church's creed and faith, symbols and dogma in the various cultural settings in which the Church finds itself. The consideration of African ancestors, as we shall describe below, is one particular area that has received a lot of theological attention.

Five specific developments can serve to illustrate this openness to the similarities between African ancestors and *communio sanctorum*. First, the case of the Chinese rites, the honor paid to Confucius, Japanese rites, and the Malabar rites tested Rome's propensity to dialogue with local cultures on matters that are important to cultures that welcome Christianity. These controversies were rooted primarily in the compatibility of customs and rites adopted from other cultures with Catholic teachings. The important lesson from the resolution of those controversies that pertains to Africa consists in the fact that Africans' relation with their ancestors is based upon the belief that death does not break the profound communion established between the living and the deceased. Communion continues in spite of and beyond death, a belief that has nothing in it that is inimical to Christian faith. Consequently, ecclesiastical leadership showed prudent initiative and firm determination to inspire and guide the missionaries, check extravagances, and keep contextualization in the bounds of orthodox

channels. In response to the Japanese rites (May 26, 1936), veneration of Confucius, the Chinese rites (December 8, 1939), and the Malabar rites (April 9, 1940)[80] Jean-Marc Éla writes that the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda affirmed that

> A cultural phenomenon, even if it is religious in origin, does not constitute a fundamental obstacle to purity of faith, whereas an essentially religious rite may be incompatible with the demands of the gospel. Therefore it is wrong to proscribe in the name of faith customs which are characteristic of a civilization and which in fact have nothing to do with religious life.[81]

Second, coming closer to our topic, the ecclesiastical authorities exercised a far-sighted leadership that gave a new proof of the Church's intentions to carry on the great tradition to be "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22). The ordinary and universal magisterium has left room for a systematic development of a theology of ancestors. In a declaration of October 17, 1935 the bishops of Madagascar issued a directive which many African theologians have found stimulating:

> Forbid customs which attribute to the dead powers over the living; accept signs of respect and thanksgiving directed toward the dead. No currently existing custom is formally forbidden as such, with the understanding that all customs are to evolve in a Christian direction.[82]

Third, there has been a tremendous change in the magisterium's approach to culture in the period after the Second Vatican Council. Pope Paul VI's clarion call to African Bishops in Kampala in 1969 is a perfect illustration of the change of tone of the magisterium. It is a call that has often been quoted, but perhaps its full potential did not go deep and wide enough to cause the changes that the pontiff intended. Viewed against the backdrop of African ancestors, the full

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[80] Gustav Voss, "Missionary Accommodation and Ancestral Rites in the Far East," *Theological Studies* (December, 1943): 525-560.

[81] Éla, "Ancestors and Christian Faith: An African Problem," in *Liturgy and Cultural Religious Traditions*, eds. Herman Schmidt and David Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), 40.

[82] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 25.

potential of the call is yet to be realized. In the period following the closing of the Second Vatican Council, when talks of Church reform were in the air, the supreme pontiff spoke of the urgent question of the adaptation of the Gospel and of the Church to African culture. The pope urged that

> An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favoured by the Church. The liturgical renewal is a living example of this. And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity. Indeed, you possess human values and characteristic forms of culture which can rise up to perfection such as to find in Christianity, and for Christianity, a true superior fullness, and prove to be capable of a richness of expression all its own, and genuinely African. This may take time. It will require that your African soul become imbued to its depths with the secret charisms of Christianity, so that these charisms may then overflow freely, in beauty and wisdom, in the true African manner. It will require from your culture that it should not refuse, but rather eagerly desire, to draw, from the patrimony of the patristic, exegetical, and theological tradition of the Catholic Church, those treasures of wisdom which can rightly be considered universal, above all, those which can be most easily assimilated by the African mind.[83]

The pope's call came as a corrective measure to a theological and literary environment in which, as Amalorpavadass and many others have pointed out, some western missionaries often advocated for the elimination of African cultural practices. Pope Paul VI's call was an important check against a background in which ages of mission malpractices condemned and dismissed Africans' rituals and cultures simply as pagan and barbaric practices. The Luo in particular fought against the perception of their cultural practices as inferior, as we saw in the example of the Legio Maria breakaway church that fought what its members perceived as western cultural imperialism. If the Church was perceived to support western hegemony in the early missionary days, it must now foster an environment in which the African peoples can see themselves as cultural equals to the cultures through which Christianity is spread.

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[83] Pope Paul VI, "Address to Bishops of Africa, Kampala, 1969" *African Eccesial Review* 20, (1978): 322.

Fourth, other important teachings of the Church have opened up a new spirit of creativity. John Paul II wrote:

> Coming into contact with different cultures, the church must welcome all that can be reconciled with the Gospel in the tradition of a people to bring to it the riches of Christ and to be enriched in turn by the many different forms of wisdom of the nations of the earth.[84]

Vatican II, especially through *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Gaudium et Spes,* has expressed a desire to embrace the riches of cultures of different peoples throughout the world. *Gaudium et Spes* has embraced cultural plurality and encouraged the proper development of culture (19-21, 28). Moreover, it provided a framework for the theological struggle for authenticity, cultural development, and the global resurgence of religion (GS, 53-62). One key passage serves as an example:

> [H]ow are we to acknowledge as lawful the claims of autonomy, which culture makes for itself, without falling into a humanism which is purely earthbound and even hostile to religion? . . . [H]uman culture must evolve today in such a way that it will develop the whole human person harmoniously and integrally, and will help all [people] to fulfil the tasks to which they are called (GS, 56).

Pope John Paul II had even expressed an enthusiasm which unfortunately has not always been fully utilized. He directed "the incarnation of the Gospel in autonomous cultures and at the same time the introduction of these cultures into the life of the church."[85]

The Catechism includes clear guidelines that recognize the importance of culture:

> The celebration of the liturgy, therefore, should correspond to the genius and culture of the different peoples. In order that the mystery of Christ be "made known to all the nations . . . to bring about the obedience of faith," it must be proclaimed, celebrated, and lived in all cultures in such a way that they

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[84] John Pul II, *Discourse to Pontifical Council for Culture,* 5, cited in David a. Lysik, *The Liturgy Documents : A Parish Resource* (Vol. 2) (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999), 116.

[85] John Paul II, encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli*, June 2,1985, No. 21 cited in Tim Perry, *The legacy of John Paul II: An Evangelical Assessment* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007),

> themselves are not abolished by it, but redeemed and fulfilled: It is with and through their own human culture, assumed and transfigured by Christ, that the multitude of God's children has access to the Father, in order to glorify him in the one Spirit.[86]

8.2.3 Ethical and moral foundations

To have lived a good life is one of the requirements for a deceased to be given full funerary rites and eventually to be recognized as an ancestor. Many scholars agree that the good life that ancestors have lived on earth enables them to acquire a superhuman status, and live in proximity with God from where they are able to intercede on behalf of their earthly relatives.[87]

In the western cult of saints, to have lived a good life throughout one's entire life is not absolutely essential for recognition as a saint. Christianity is full of stories of deathbed conversions which would prove to be ineffective examples for evangelization in Africa. For examples, Christ told the "good thief": "this day you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:43). Constantine, historians believe, only chose religious tolerance as an instrument to bolster his reign—he was baptised on his deathbed in 337 by Eusebius, the bishop of Nicomedia.[88] In his sixty-seventh Homily on St. Matthew, St. John Chrysostom tells a story of a celebrated and notorious actress who lived in Antioch and had a reputation for an evil lifestyle in cities as far away as Cilicia and Cappadocia. Toward the end of her life she repented and lived years in the strictest austerity, wearing a hair-shirt, and voluntarily shutting herself up in a solitary prison. After her death she became an object of an ecclesiastical cult.[89]

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[86] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1204.)

[87] F. Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, c2010), 51.

[88] Hans A. Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*, 2nd ed. (Oxon, UK; New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 22-30, 83.

[89] Members of English Church, tr., *The homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. Matthew, part 2* (Oxford: J.H. Parker, 1843), 67. More analysis by Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends*

African traditional religion would frown at such easy ways of becoming a representative of the society in the courts of God. This is because African traditional religion sees an intrinsic connection between morality and religion.[90] In African religious beliefs and practices, values, laws, customs, rites and general behaviour patterns determine how the African societies achieve their aims and objectives. When African ancestors are considered to influence the lives of their communities, their central and integral role within society can be further analyzed. Such a role has been maintained and has enhanced life force in African societies. Gabriel Gomes writes that:

> For most African peoples, while God is the source and final guardian of law and morality, he has delegated his task to the ancestors, other deities, and spirits. The immediate foundation and justification of morality are the ancestors. As their decrees are encoded in the traditions, the basis of ethics is the customs and traditions, social and ancestral obligations, and taboos established by society. Ancestors, spirits, deities, and God are invoked to legitimize and enforce traditions.[91]

Other scholars across Africa would agree with Gomes' clear insights identifying ancestors as the social conscience of a community.[92] The norms and moral values are entrusted to the living by the ancestors for the benefit of the living. The living strive to remain faithful to the examples set by the ancestors to ensure a harmonious community where everybody knows and understands their place and function. In doing so, there is continuity with the past and the social structure of

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of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography (1907), tr. V. M. Crawford (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1961), 165.

[90] P. J. Nel, "Morality and Religion in African Thought," *Acta Theologica* 2, (2008): 33.

[91] Gabriel J. Gomes, *Discovering World Religions: A Guide for the Inquiring Reader* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse Books, 2012), 44.

[92] Laurenti magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 57, 77-78.

the extended family is maintained. This is the sense in which scholars agree that African ancestors are guardians of traditions.[93] Gomez writes that

> As the ancestors are the guardians of the moral order, people are subject to their wrath and punishment when they do not conform to public norms and obligations. For such a breach, an individual makes restitution through sacrifices and offerings.[94]

Moreover, as guardians of the society's moral order they help maintain the due process of law as commonly practiced within the penal systems of modern sovereign states:

> The notion of due process of law permeated indigenous law; deprivation of personal liberty or property was rare; security of the person was assured, and customary legal process was characterized not by unpredictable and harsh encroachments upon the individual by the sovereign, but by meticulous, if cumbersome, procedures for decision-making. The African conception of human rights was an essential aspect of African humanism sustained by religious doctrine and the principle of accountability to the ancestral shades.[95]

On a spiritual plane, the faithfulness of the living to the ancestors is a source of blessing. Shorter writes that

> [Ancestors] are the good spirits who sought and won the favor of the supreme being during their lifetimes and whose friendship with the living today is a pledge of the future blessings. . . The supreme being . . . is favorably disposed towards his children when he sees their filial piety towards their ancestors, and their anxiety to do the things that they did.[96]

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[93] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 85; K. Nürnberger, *The Living Dead and the Living God* (Pietamaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2007), 29.

[94] Gomes, *Discovering World Religions*, 44.

[95] S. K. B. Asante, "Nation building and human rights in Emergent African Nations," *Cornell International Law Journal* 2, (1969): 73-4.

[96] Shorter, *African Christian Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), 99-100.

8.2.4 Sociological foundations

Éla suggests that "there is a great need to rediscover within Christianity an African vision of humanity—which is precisely what is at stake in dealing with ancestors."[97] Éla is pointing to the value of community and the centrality of ancestors in the life of the community.

Communal living is one of the most important elements of African traditional thought. Community is so foundational in African social life, it has been said that "individual identity is established and fulfilled only in the context of community."[98] That is why Bujo can confidently say that "For Black Africa, it is not the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am") but an existential *cognatus sum, ergo sumus* ("I am known, therefore we are") that is decisive."[99]

The interconnectedness of African peoples is demonstrated especially at the important times of celebrations that I described above. At such times, the living, the dead, and even the as-yet-unborn are usually brought together. The network of relationships constitutes the bedrock of the African sociological worldview.

The connectedness of peoples within an African community is key to the understanding of African communalism and kinship. Many authors see African communal living not simply as a small geographical location where a given human group lives, but rather in a wider and more encompassing way. Accordingly, Setiloane writes:

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[97] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 25.

[98] Diane Stinton, "Africa, East and West" in *An Introduction to Third World Theologies*, ed. John Parrat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 129.

[99] Bujo, Foundations of African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality, tr. Brian McNeil (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 4. Bujo has another publication in Kiswahili that is equally insightful in analyzing the communal and individual dimensions in participating in common activities: *Utamadunisho na Kanisa La Mazingira* [Inculturation and Basic Christian Communities] (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1999).

> [T]he term community is inclusive of all life (*bios*): animals, the habitat (the land), flora, and even the elements. The success of life is found in the ability to maintain a healthy relationship with all.[100]

It is the ancestors who are widely believed to possess powers that take part in the governance and administration of the natural order and human affairs.[101] That is why it may be necessary at times for a person or a given group of persons to perform certain ritual actions (for example the sacrificial offering as demonstrated in *tero buru*) to restore the equilibrium in creation, or to influence or change a state of affairs (i.e. to seek healing, or prosperity, to ask for blessing, or guidance and so on).[102]

The fact that the African ancestors occupy a special position in African Traditional Religion accentuates their sociological significance in African ritual systems. It is in the veneration of ancestors that solidarity of members of the society is revivified and sustained. Therefore ancestors stand at the center where the network of social relations of the community is improved and the community is bound in an orderly fashion.

From the analysis of Luo funeral rituals above, I argued that the performance of the funeral ritual sustains the social order within a community and builds integration and cohesion. Moreover, those rituals demonstrate the Luo social practices which center around remembering, loving, honoring or venerating the deceased members of the society in order to achieve communion among the living, the dead, the unborn, and with God.

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[100] G Setiloane, "Towards a Biocentric Theology and Ethic - via Africa," in *Faith, Science and African Culture: African Cosmology and Africa's Contribution to Science,* ed. C. W. du Toit (Pretoria: UNISA, 2004), 65-72.

[101] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 47.

[102] J. Kudadjie and J. Osei, "Understanding African Cosmology: Its Content and Contribution to World-View, Community and the Development of Science," in *Faith, science and African culture* ed. Toit, 33-64.

From the African sense of community comes also the understanding that life is sacred. Respect for the spiritual and mystical dimensions of life is fundamental, as well as respect for the human person and the family. Magesa expresses this succinctly when he writes that

> The African view of the universe contains the following major themes: the sacrality of life, respect for the spiritual and mystical nature of creation, and especially of the human person; the sense of family, community, solidarity and participation; and an emphasis on fecundity and sharing in life, friendship, healing and hospitality.[103]

The implications for consideration of African social life are important in building on the life of the Church. Renowned ecclesiologists such as Avery Dulles, Jean Marie René Tillard, John Zizioulas, Hans Küng, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Yves Congar have enriched our understanding of the Church and advocated certain models of the Church.[104] However, there is no particular model that is universally accepted as best representing the image of the Church.

One of the most popular images of the Church that has been advocated from the African perspective is the use of family as a model. Thus theologians have labored to show the Biblical and Magisterial foundations of the model.[105] Indeed the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the African Synod established that the family model fits the Church in Africa because of the prevalent understanding of value of the family in Africa and that of the Church as the family of God. Part of the document said:

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[103] Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 52-53.

[104] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen has explored some of the nuances in the work of seven renowned ecclesiologists and offered excellent introduction to the various contemporary issues in ecclesiology. See his study *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

[105] See for example Aidan G. Msafiri, "The Church as a Family Model: Its Strengths and Weaknesses," in *African Theology Today*, ed. Emmanuel Katongole (Scranton: The University of Scranton Press, 2002), 85-97.

> Among the biblical images of the Church enumerated in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, Lumen Gentium, that of the Church as the House of God (c.f. Timothy 3:15), the Household of God in the Spirit (c.f. Ephesians 2:19-22) is particularly relevant for Africa . . . In many answers to the Lineamenta, there is a strong emphasis on the notion of the Church as the family of God among human beings.[106]

As we have seen above, the ancestors are the focal points of both patrilineal and matrilineal families in Africa. The families express their unity and wholeness in the funerary rituals and other reconciliatory ceremonies in coming together in the name of a common ancestor. The rituals of sharing meals, food and drink, libations and dances become the necessary cultural impetuses that spur a cultural unity to seek greater unity and wholeness of the society. These rituals are usually expressed in a fuller way during community celebrations. A celebration that lies at the centre of the Church's life, and which resonates well with many aspects of African spiritual sentiment, is the celebration of the Eucharist. Commenting on the centrality of the saints, the ancestors, and the living, worshipping community in the *Rite Zaïrois* (Zairean liturgy of the Eucharist) Nwaka Egbulem writes that:

> Invocation of the saints and ancestors is made to establish a unity between the already triumphant church and the pilgrim church. It also seeks to obtain spiritual support for the living members who gather for worship. The invocation reveals the belief that the dead are not strangers to the present assembly of worship.[107]

The desire to be both truly Christian and authentically African is still alive in the hearts of many Christian believers. In the following section I will offer some perspectives on how the *Rite Zaïrois* can provide a spiritual paradigm for promoting an authentic engagement between the

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[106] Msafiri, "The Church as a Family Model," 85.

[107] Nwaka Chris Egbulem, *The Power of Afrocentric Celebrations: Inspirations From the Zairean Liturgy* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 58.

gospel of Christ and the cultures of Africa, particularly highlighting the important role of the African ancestors.

8.2.5 Theological foundations

We can examine similarities in the relationships between the living and the dead in the African societies and in the Catholic theological tradition by focussing on the African ancestors and the Catholic theology regarding the Communion of Saints. As Pope John Paul II expressed in his *Ecclesia in Africa*: "[Africans] believe intuitively that the dead continue to live and remain in communion with them. Is this not in some way *a preparation for belief in the Communion of the Saints?*" (Italics are mine for emphasis.)

African ancestors are already a constitutive part of the Communion of Saints as taught by Catholic Church. The cultural practices of the African people in relation to their ancestors include religious piety that centers on honouring, loving and remembering the dead, while at the same time asking for their mediatory help. Since African ancestors are not worshipped but honoured, venerated, and loved because of their nearness to God in the afterlife, the corresponding beliefs and practices in the Catholic faith tradition are called devotion to the saints.

Scholars have established similarities between ancestral veneration and the Christian communion of saints. McVeigh, for example, takes Hebrews 12:1's description of "cloud of witnesses," that is, the spiritual aggregation of saints, and applies the concept to African ancestors:

> The African lives in spiritual world. He is conscious of being surrounded by a cloud of witnesses and by powers which are not fully intelligible. Both the world of the

> seen and the unseen are realities, and the living seek contact with that which is invisible. The sense of dependence in the face of mysteries of life inspires the African with awe and reverence and impels him to enter into communion with the unknown. The African is deeply religious and his religious sentiments express themselves in worship.[108]

One of the first conferences on African theology in the formative period was held by the African Staff Institute in East Africa, which met in Nairobi. In 1974, a conference entitled "The Ancestors and the Communion of Saints" was held in Kenya to discuss ways of expanding African theology. In regard to African ancestors, the conference developed a consensus which was summarized by Fasholé-Luke as follows:

> Ancestors still had a significant religious role in the life of East Africans and ...this situation should be carefully considered and critically evaluated by African theologians. It was also agreed that Africans venerated their ancestors in a manner similar to the way saints were venerated by some Christian churches; thus there is a sound basis for developing African doctrines of the Communion of Saints...It was felt that in developing the doctrines about the Communion of Saints, African Christianity can make significant contributions to global Christianity.[109]

The next important theological development was the publication of Bujo's "Nos Ancêtres, Ces Saints Inconnus" in 1979.[110] In the same year, John Mutiso-Mubinda referred to Christ as "our 'Ancestor' par excellence" because of his work of mediation and because he "passed over" to the Father.[111] These were followed by Nyamiti's *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology From an African Perspective* in 1984. After these two landmark studies there has been a tremendous growth in African theological discourse that has reflected confidence and theological maturity

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[108] Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod, MA: C. Stark, 1974), 103.

[109] Fasholé-Luke, "The Churches Role in Development in Sierra Leone: Papers Read at the Clergy and Ministers Vacation Course Held at Fourah College April 21st-23rd 1981," 29.

[110] Bujo "Nos Ancêtres, Ces Saints Inconnus," *Bulletin de Théologie Africaine* 1, no. 2 (1979): 165-78.

[111] John Mutiso-Mubinda, "Anthropology and the Paschal Mystery," in *Spearhead*, no. 59 (Eldoret: Gaba, 1979), 52.

especially in the field of Christology. By their attention to the cultural veneration of African ancestors, theologians began a movement away from using Western theological and anthropological categories in articulating African rituals and philosophies. We shall return to this development in the next chapter and analyze how the various christological formulations affect this study. For now it suffices to acknowledge that the role of the ancestors in African Traditional Religion has been considered within African theological circles as one of the most consistently prominent themes in discourse on African religion.

Around 1989 Nyamiti expressed hope that the planned first African Synod would have a unique importance for the various African Christologies which by then had not found their way into the magisterial teachings of the Church.[112] The Synod of African Bishops which held a very positive view of African ancestors was held in Rome in 1994. A. O. Onwubiko reports that

> The final proposals of the Synod Fathers to the pope defended African traditional religious heritage, especially ancestor veneration. This is a very big break-through for inculturation. Therefore, according to the Brooklyn Tablet: On another inculturation topic, one proposition recommended that as long as precautions are taken not to diminish worship of God or veneration of saints, ancestor veneration be permitted with proper liturgies.[113]

The Assembly's openness to the development of theology of inculturation in Africa is commendable. At the same time we see here that clearly it is a case of too little, too late. The Assembly lost an opportunity to come up with an African theology that considers African ancestors and brings together the essential aspects of the Christian faith and African tradition. It is unfortunate that the Assembly "defended" African traditional heritage, as if to suggest it was otherwise nearly obliterated. Moreover, the Assembly recommended that "ancestor veneration be permitted with

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[112] Nyamiti, "African Christologies Today," 19.

[113] A. O. Onwubiko, *Echoes from the African Synod: The Future of the African Church From Present Past Experiences* (Enugu, Nigeria: SNAAP Press Ltd, 1994), 137-138.

proper liturgies." We wonder: why only "liturgies"? Did they mean to limit the relevance of African ancestors to liturgy alone? How about the other important areas of the Church in Africa, such as the highly developed Christological formulations and even yet-to-be developed areas such as spirituality, Canon law, and ecclesiology? Clearly, the Assembly backpedalled the theological momentum by failing to project a more active and intensive commitment of the Church in linking past theological progress with a possible future.

Several theologians have expressed an urgent and important need to consider ancestor veneration as theologically beneficial to African Christians. Tutu warns that "We Africans cannot ignore the dead. A Christianity that has no place for [ancestors] speaks in alien tones."[114] Perhaps the logical question we could ask at this point is: what specific parallels can we draw between ancestor veneration and the doctrine of communion of saints? To this question we shall now turn.

[114] Tutu, "The Ancestor Cult," 100.

CHAPTER NINE

9.0 AFRICAN ANCESTORS AS SIMILAR TO *COMMUNIO SANCTORUM*

9.1 DRAWING PARALLELS BETWEEN AFRICAN ANCESTORS AND *COMMUNION SANCTORUM*

9.1.1 Ancestral beliefs as a basis for contextual theologies in Africa

Many scholars have made proposals for theologizing within specific contexts. Perhaps the clearest proposal, one that has been shared by other scholars, has been articulated well by Schreiter, who proposes that a local theology ought to be defined and continued attention given to three factors: gospel, church, and culture.[1] According to Schreiter, this leads to "an ever-expanding awareness of the role of each of these factors" as roots that nurture the development of a local theology.[2] Schreiter's proposal may be placed in a larger theological and scholarly framework in which several developments have taken place. Three of them deserve mention at this point.

First, Karl Rahner reminded the theological community of the dramatic shift in outlook needed to guide theological efforts to embrace the reality of a "world church."[3] Of particular interest to this study is Rahner's assertion that the Church must embrace the pluralism and multiplicity of the new pastoral situations by adopting new ways of interpreting the church's faith and essence as a world church.[4] The shift and new interpretation of which Rahner speaks

[1] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 20.
[2] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 20.
[3] Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies*, 40, no. 4 (1979): 716-727.
[4] Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," 727.

places this study in sharper focus: The theological community needs to give serious consideration to African ancestors in order to include them in the process of indigenizing Christian faith in a land on which the gospel of Christ was heard in New Testament times.

Second, there seems to be some positive developments along the lines of Rahner's call. Since the age of the Apostles and the Church Fathers, there has been a perennial question of how the Church can exist in this world in particular historical settings. In the last century, Ernst Troeltsch and H. Richard Niebuhr addressed the relationship between Christianity and culture.[5] Scholars have made modest efforts to highlight the importance of cultural and religious pluralism in order to offer a theology more relevant in the various socio-cultural contexts. Two examples are in order here. First, Stephen Bevans, in his *Models of Contextual Theology*, has identified six intellectually honest and distinct models for contextualizing theology.[6] Second, Schreiter, for example in his study *Constructing Local Theologies*, acknowledges the important shift in perspective that has taken place in theology in recent years. Although Schreiter does not treat the particular theological issues that come from the various regions of the Church, which would make the study much more effective, he nevertheless points out two things which are relevant to this study. One: new questions that shape the Africans' response to the Gospel have emerged, questions that cannot be responded to by traditional answers.[7] Two: for a new identity to emerge from an older traditional theological reflection, old answers must not be impressed upon new

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[5] See Mark D. Chapman, *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology: Religion and Cultural Synthesis in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco : HarperSanFrancisco, [2001] 1951).

[6] Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002 c.1992). The one weakness of Bevans' study is that he does not define certain important concepts of his study such as "culture." This weakness makes the book somewhat cumbersome to read; for example, a factually and structurally valid statement such as "a person who does not share one's experience is not to be fully trusted to speak of God in that person's context" (p. 19) requires one to read several other pages in order to understand the full implication of the statement.

[7] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 2.

situations.[8] The new questions that demand new answers will eventually cause a new identity to emerge as to how Africans can live with their ancestors.

Third, the patterns of globalization, the challenges of cross-cultural tension and misunderstandings of the past have led the Church to a new awareness in its ways of evangelization and missionary activity. The well-known Chinese rites controversy that raged intermittently from the 1630s and continued well into the 1930s, now serves as a paradigm for the need for Christianity to free itself from exclusively western structures and to give more consideration to certain important African ritual practices such as those related to the ancestors.[9]

Fourth, apart from the message of *Dominus Iesus* (which I will return to further on), the universal Church seems to be more ready and open than any other time in the history of the Church to engage the various world traditions in such a way that the reciprocal character of the process (wherein Christian tradition transforms a given tradition and that tradition in turn enriches Christianity) is acknowledged. Calls have been made especially in the magisterial statements of the recent popes and in Vatican II documents (as I already noted above). The clear and powerful call of Pope John Paul II to the theological community deserves to be heard repeatedly:

> *Theology* plays a particularly important role in the search for a synthesis of knowledge as well as in the dialogue between faith and reason. It serves all other disciplines in their search for meaning, not only by helping them to investigate how their discoveries will affect individuals and society but also by bringing a perspective and an orientation not contained within their own methodologies. In turn, interaction with these other disciplines and their discoveries enriches

[8] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 3.

[9] Most scholarly literature on the Chinese Rites Controversy portrays the cultural tensions between the Chinese authorities and Rome as having contributed to the vehemence and bitterness that characterized it as well as the length of time that it took. Henri Bernard-Maître, for example, has described the various complexities of the controversy and pointed out that it was possibly the greatest internal struggle in the long history of the Catholic Church. See H. Bernard-Maître S.J., "Chinois (Rites)," in *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclesiastiques.* XII (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1953), 731–41, 931.

> theology, offering it a better understanding of the world today, and making theological research more relevant to current needs. Because of its specific importance among the academic disciplines, every Catholic University should have a faculty, or at least a chair, of theology.[10]

9.1.2 Creativity and innovation in African theology

Has Schreiter's proposal been applied in the African context? It is somewhat disappointing to notice that there has been a lot of talk and writings about "African theology" but on a closer look, one finds that very little has emerged that translates into a systematic contextual theology in Africa.

Tinyiko Sam Malekele's assessment that since the 1980s, African theology has demonstrated "a remarkable knack for contextualization, dynamism, and innovation" is an overstatement of sorts.[11] One looks in vain for the creativity, innovation, and dynamism about which Malekele writes. As early as 1979, Mbiti surveyed nearly three hundred published papers and books in the general area of African theology and voiced a lament which can be repeated even today:

> Some of us are getting tired of seeing all sorts of articles and references under the big banner: AFRICAN THEOLOGY (or some similar wording). The substance of these articles often turns out to be advice on how African theology should be done, where it should be done, who should do it, what it should say, ad infinitum. Some of these self-made theological advisors, whether they be African or foreign, have little or nothing to produce beyond their generous advice; and others want to play the role of theological engineers who meticulously sabotage spontaneous theological output by African Christians.[12]

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[10] Pope John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclessiae* (On the catholic Universities) par. 19 available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html

[11] Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 4.

[12] Mbiti, "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 4:3 (1980): 122.

Diane Stinton is perhaps right in her assessment that considering the burning issues identified in the continent, the two theological trends that emerged from the 1950s to the 1980s, namely 'African' or 'inculturation' theology and 'Black' or 'liberation' theology, are "simmering."[13] Accordingly, one has a sense that there is no fully articulated African theology. There are, however, modest attempts and ongoing discussions, some of which conclude that a sharp distinction between inculturation and liberation theologies can no longer be made.[14] Some conclude that it is difficult not only to distinguish one trend of theology from the other but also to identify which theology qualifies for the name "African theology," which leads Nyamiti to declare that "there is no generally accepted definition of African Theology."[15]

Therefore there is room for creativity, innovation, and dynamism which social-critical theologians such as Éla and Bujo believe is the right time to discover the liberating aspects of what is genuinely African.[16] Several people have explicitly expressed the desire to theologize from the African perspective. Gaudencia Aoko (of Legio Maria), whose insights about Christianity in Africa, although expressed in a rudimentary way, are concisely and confidently expressed, underscores that recognition. Similar sentiments which most theologians would agree with were expressed by the "Final Communiqué" of the Pan-African Conference of the Third World Theologians of 1977:

> By African theology we mean a theology which is based on the biblical faith and speaks to the African "soul" (or is relevant to Africa). It is expressed in categories

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[13] Stinton, *Africa, East and West*, 114.

[14] See for example John Parrat, *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1997), 4-8 and Martien E. Brinkam, *The Non-Western Jesus: Jesus as Boddhisttva, Avatara, Guru, Prophet, Ancestor, or Healer?* (London, UK; Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2007), 216.

[15] Quoted in Vähäkangas, *In Search of Foundations For African Catholicism: Charles Nyamiti's Theological Methodology* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1999), 55.

[16] See Éla, "The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ" in *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering*, ed., Y. Tesfai (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 3-12. See also Bujo, *Christmas: God Becomes Man in Black Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publication, 1995), 17-37.

> of thought which arise out of the philosophy of the African people . . . We believe the African theology will be understood in the context of African life and culture and the creative attempt of the African peoples to shape a new future that is different from the colonial past and neo-colonial present. The African situation requires a new theological methodology that is different from the approaches of the dominant theologies of the west.[17]

The Conference defined African theology succinctly and encouraged theologians to critique established theologies and to come up with a theological methodology that is different from prevailing ones. There seemed to be a new awakening following the Conference's call that saw a few theologians from Africa show interest in developing indigenous theologies. Paying special attention to the underlying self-awareness of the theologian within his existential cultural situation ultimately enables the theologian to bring his faith to the level of intelligible expression. To that end we can conclude that African theologians became more sharply aware of the challenge before them. Kofi Appiah-Kubi, for example, could boldly say that

> We demand to serve the Lord in our own terms and without being turned into Euro-American or Semitic bastards before we do so. That the gospel has come to remain in Africa cannot be denied, but now our theological reflections must be reflected to the contextual African situations. Our questions must not be what Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, or any other Karl has to say, but what God would have us do in our living concrete condition.[18]

We wonder, how can Appiah-Kubi's epistemological and methodological terms apply to the present study? What kinds of concerns should we keep in mind when we focus on the similarities between African spirituality and theology and *communio sanctorum* and how can a critique of the tradition of *communio sanctorum* become intelligible to an African who is more comfortable

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[17] Cited in Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres, eds., *African Theology en Route* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 190-3.

[18] Appia-Kubi, *African Theology en Route*, viii.

with ancestral beliefs? Perhaps the starting point can be the contact between ritual practices and beliefs.

9.1.3 The relevance of African ancestral theology

This present study analyzes the need for creativity and innovation in developing an African theology and proposes African ancestral theology to be both relevant and practical in advancing African theology.

Indeed Mbiti has cautioned that "until Christianity can penetrate [the spirit world of the African], it will for a long time remain on the surface."[19] This study argues that African ancestral ritual practices are one practical way by which Christianity can penetrate the African cosmology. Tempels sounded similar call years ago when he said, "European civilization imparted to the Bantu is a mere superficial garb which has no deep impact upon their souls."[20] These insights heighten the need and the urgency to focus of the similarities between African ancestors and the doctrine of Communion of Saints.

Ernest Sambou understood and articulated this urgency well when he asserted that "In most African countries the prime theological urgency consists in discovering the true face of Jesus Christ, that Christians may have living experience of that face, in depth and according to

[19] Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter Between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 155.

[20] Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 113-4.

their genius."[21] What followed such calls are the Christological formulations that gave rise to different names of Jesus that reflected African cultural traditions, including Jesus as Ancestor.[22]

Whereas Mbiti and Tempels' calls are for a comprehensive theological discourse that touches on the wide range of issues that affect the African soul, the Christological formulations that flourished especially since the late 1970s touched only one aspect of theology, which is Christology. Most of what has been produced in the recent past as inculturated expression of African theology has been helpful in giving to Africans a face of Jesus that they can relate to from their cultural perspectives. But as we see, even in the analysis of the African cultural context, there are many contextual issues which African Christian theology could address which are influenced by African ancestors.

African ancestors and their significance for an average African Christian is a theological issue that is both pastoral and existential, and that must be adequately addressed before Christian faith can have any genuine effect in African life. Just as in the early Church when the apostles developed various theologies that were appropriate to the local circumstances of various

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[21] Cited in T. Merrigan and J. Haers, eds., *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology* (Leuven: University Press; Sterling, Va.: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2000), 288; also cited by Schreiter in his, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, xi.

[22] The basic argument propelled the Christological formulations in the African context can be framed as follows: since Christ is formed in the lives of Africans in diverse places, at different times, and in assorted human situations within the continent, theologians must look at a plurality of Christologies in Africa. The African must not become an "honorary white" as a precondition for becoming a Christian. The constant attentive sensitivity to the dialogue between the biblical text, the cultures of the people, and the practical needs within the different contexts in Africa must lead to different understandings and interpretations of Christ in the continent. Consequently, as Diane Stinton put it, "A widespread methodological presupposition is that genuine Christological reflection cannot be separated from Africa's socio-political, religio-cultural and economic contexts—this is the real and concrete everyday experience within which we Christologize." Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 16. The task of "Christologizing" in that way implies intentionally deviating "from the approaches of the dominant theologies of the West, a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people." Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 16.

Based on these assumptions, theologians ensured that African Christologies were not merely abstract constructs hanging in the air, but rather Christologies that are intertwined with the peoples' lives, life-giving and meaningful to Africans in their various contexts. Accordingly Jesus has been portrayed as life-giver, mediator, loved one, and leader. See Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*. See also Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*.

Christian communities and the cultures in which they were embedded, so now scholars must develop an African Christian theology of ancestors. *Communio sanctorum* that we are considering in this study has been passed down from one generation to another and from one culture to another. However, placed on the same platform with African ancestors, *communio sanctorum* possesses a different relevance for Africans who are far removed from the contexts and theological concerns from which it emerged.

Nyamiti and Bujo are two eminent theologians who have proposed two models of ancestral Christology in contemporary African theological systems. They have each elaborated on the structure of their theological systems, their methodological approach, and the usefulness of the cultural perspective that they give to Christ. They have set a literary momentum for developing systematic theologies on the nature and person of Christ which is currently flourishing in Africa.

However, I must point out that proposing African Christological motifs alone, suggesting the different faces of Jesus that Africans can identify with, is inadequate to address the wide spectrum of theological issues that arise within the African religiosity. That is why I see this present study as an effort to open an avenue through which some burning theological and cultural issues can be approached from the point of view of the cult of ancestors.

The Catholic Church cherishes *communio sanctorum*. The doctrine, as I noted earlier, did not begin from the outset as a well-defined and complete teaching in the Apostolic Church. James Morrison and Helmut Koester remind us that Christianity began with the person of Jesus and that creed and faith, symbols and dogma are merely the expressions of response to Jesus.[23] It

[23] James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & stock Publishers, 2006), 205.

is up to present day theologians to visualize how the diversifications of responses from the African context can become essential components of genuine growth arising from the several different religious and cultural practices in Africa.

9.1.4 The beneficiaries of such a theology

The local churches of Africa are the first to benefit from a theology that emerges from their experiences and cultural institutions. The understanding of the African churches is based upon an ecclesiological framework advocated by Tillard, who writes:

> [T]he catholic Church of God is the *koinonia* of local churches mutually recognizing themselves as churches of God. This mutual recognition we think is essential. The Latin West concealed this in its desire to make everything depend upon the relationship with the Church of Rome and its bishop. The catholic communion was seen as a totality of local churches all in communion with the *sedes* of Rome, without it being made clear that this necessary relationship with Rome is in the service of the mutual koinonia of local churches throughout time and space. In the gospel of God, which expresses the divine plan to reconcile all the human blocs shredded by sin, this mutual relationship is what counts more than anything else. What good would it be for them all to be in communion with Rome if the local churches remained water-tight compartments, shut up in their differences, as portrayed in a book for children which shows the Church as a great sun radiating around Rome, with the rays only converging. In the Holy Spirit and by the power of the Eucharist, it is mutual recognition that forms the concrete fabric of *koinonia*.[24]

Tillard raises interesting questions which, although they lie outside of this study, must be asked because of their implications: Is the true meaning of Catholicism to be found in the Church of Rome, which should establish the framework for the rest of the church? Or does Catholicism exist primarily at the local level, for example in individual dioceses and parishes of Africa, each with their own practices and theologies? Affirming the latter would ensure that African churches in their unique circumstances are not swallowed up in the universality. We consciously employ

[24] Tillard, "The Local Church Within Catholicity," *The Jurist* 52 (1992): 448–454.

local forms to express Christian truths at local levels, so that the receiving culture assimilates the Christian message at the deepest level of culture.

At the same time, given the multiculturalism in contemporary trends of human interaction accelerated by globalization, the Church in Africa seems called to share its riches with the Church in other parts of the world. We should ask with Fasholé-Luke: "Is it at this point that the African Churches can make a significant contribution to an aspect of Christian theology which has often been neglected in the past by many theologians?"[25] The answer to this question will determine whether and how veneration of ancestors as an aspect of theology could be salvaged and recognized as an important aspect of theology.

9.2 THE DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CULT OF AFRICAN ANCESTORS AND *COMMUNIO SANCTORUM*

9.2.1 African ancestors and *communio sanctorum* as equal partners in dialogue

In a cultural and religious environment in which, as Bujo has rightly put it, "many vital elements were destroyed, and the opportunity of really incarnating the Christian message in Africa was lost,"[26] a corrective measure is a theological and cultural imperative. This correction could come about by viewing the cult of African ancestors and *communio sanctorum* as being equally important to the traditions to which they belong. Moreover, the interrelating of the two traditions can only happen if the religious and cultural influences of the two traditions are harmonized.

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[25] Fasholé-Luke, "Ancestor Veneration and the Communion of Saints," 210.
[26] Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 1992), 48.

Some scholars, having weighed the prospects of harmonizing the cult of African ancestors with *communio sanctorum*, argue that the Christian doctrine should be placed side by side with the African ancestors rather than above the ancestors. Are such scholars justified in suggesting that African ancestors can share the same theological platform with the Christian Saints?

Jean-Marc Éla is one such scholar. Éla explains that the belief in African ancestors is a valid independent institution in itself that may never be replaced by the Christian saints. He writes:

> We should not think for a minute that veneration of the saints can be an African substitute for communion with the ancestors! That would be just one more way to lead converts away from an essential dimension of their culture. It would be a dangerous mystification to give Africans the impression that the saints are now their ancestors, and that the saints alone can be venerated and addressed in prayer. Sooner or later the converts would rediscover what ecclesiastical pressures had obliged them to suppress. If the Church does not recognize the cult of the ancestors, people will be forced to practice it in secret.[27]

Éla's argument are consistent with those of Mbiti and Tempels that we have seen above, pointing at the inability of certain western ideas and practices to penetrate the soul of the African. All these authors agree on the assumption that the failure of western religious practices makes the African believers revert to their indigenous African practices and to find solace in their ancestors.

The arguments of these two scholars sound reasonable enough to be followed to their logical conclusion. It implies that each tradition is adequate for its adherents. African culture has its ancestors embedded in its wisdom, insights and values that informed the lives of Africans. *Communio sanctorum* is built upon a spirituality that emphasizes the transcendent unity of

[27] Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 28.

Christians in a tripartite Church. The challenge is to avoid a situation in which one institution is placed above the other and instead consider the two institutions as being equal partners.[28] From this perspective, the cult of African ancestors does not become merely a "preparation" for the gospel in the sense of predisposing the African adherents to respond positively to *communio sanctorum*. It is rather that comprehension of the fundamental questions in *communio sanctorum* have been made possible by the cult of African ancestors. As a point of comparison, a Democrat may know the ideals and principles of the Republican Party but does not necessarily become a Republican simply by virtue of knowing those ideals. If he chooses to become a Republican then he has the necessary theoretical knowledge to do so. Likewise, if an African Christian chooses to embrace *communio sanctorum*, he has the advantage of having the background understanding of the cult of ancestors. The cult of African ancestors serves as a "preparation" because of the interacting conceptual and religious entities that are structurally similar in both traditions. It is in this sense that the cult of ancestors can be considered first as a preamble to the understanding of *communio sanctorum* before parallels can be drawn between the two spiritual institutions.

If in the past efforts in evangelization, there was an unequal power relationship between the Christian missionaries and the African natives, in the meeting of the saints and the ancestors

[28] I need to emphasize that the equality that I argue for here is only in viewing the two institutions of the African ancestors and *communio sanctorum* as being on an equal platform for the sake of mutual dialogue. This argument is to be differentiated from those already made by several scholars for religious pluralism. A few examples of such scholars are in order here for the sake of clarity. John Hick has maintained that recognition of other religions as equal partners is the only way of Christianity's survival in a pluralistic world. See John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 9. Hick's other works that represents him as one of the most respected scholars of religious pluralism include *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford; Chatham, NY: Oneworld, 1993); *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982); and *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985). The modernist Jacques Dupuis has also relied heavily on Karl Rahner to argue that all members of all religions are equal members in the "Reign of God." See Veli-Matti Kärkkainen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 60. A good understanding of the basic tenets and applications of the pluralist position can be obtained in John Hick and Paul Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralist Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

a genuine dialogue must be opened for reciprocity and mutuality between the two traditions. That dialogue must come from an understanding of the African cultures that focuses on these cultures' positive elements and a humble attitude which should have been there on the part of emissaries of Christianity in the very first place, an attitude that is expressed in the famous words of Max A. C. Warren:

> We need to approach every religion with a deep humility, by which we remember that God has not left Himself without a witness in any nation at any time. When we approach people of another faith, it should be in a spirit of expectancy. We need to listen for how God has been speaking to them and what new understanding of God's grace and love we may discover from them. Our first task in approaching others, another culture or another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are standing is holy ground. If we do not, we may find ourselves treading on people's dreams. More serious still, we may neglect remembering that God was here before our arrival.[29]

The positive tone of this passage, the humility, and recognition of God's presence in the African cultures would have counterbalanced the negative outcomes of cultural exclusivity, arrogance, and intolerance and elicited sentiments that are underpinned by equality and non-discrimination. Much contemporary theology will readily embrace this way of thinking. However, in the most recent past the official Roman Catholic teaching has failed to embrace an honest spirit of dialogue with non-Christian religions, what some scholars have called a spirit of "condescension or arrogance."[30] This failure is epitomized in the document *Dominus Iesus*[31] which clearly dampens the enthusiastic spirit we witness from the most recent magisterial papal documents and Vatican II. With *Dominus Iesus*, the Catholic Church finds itself in an awkward position

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[29] Cited in Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 56. Bevans comments that the passage appears in the preface to the seven books of the Christian Presence Series (London: SCM Press, 1959-1966.)

[30] Ludovic Lado, "The Roman Catholic Church and African Religions: A Problematic Encounter," *The Way* 45 (July 2006): 10.

[31] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *"Dominus Iesus:" On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, Rome, 2000.

regarding its understanding of religious pluralism in the contemporary world because on the one hand we have clear documents that are pastorally friendly and ecumenically sensitive to the challenges of interfaith and interreligious encounter. On the other hand, however, we have *Dominus Iesus* portraying a tight-fisted and polemical Church, expressing concern over the influence of "relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure* (or in principle)" (DI, 4). DI further emphasizes the distinction between full theological faith and what it refers to as mere "belief in the other religions that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration" (DI, 7) which human beings develop and follow in their search for truth.[32] The document further defines equality of partners in interreligious dialogue as follows:

> Equality, which is a presupposition of interreligious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ … in relation to the founders of the other religions (DI, 29).

Obviously, with the tone and explicit expression of superiority of the cited parts of the document above, no genuine engagement between the African ancestors and Christian Saints can occur according to the analysis we have made so far. Furthermore, *Dominus Iesus* seems to have undone the positive and hopeful strides taken by the encyclical of Pope John Paul II *Ecclesia in*

[32] Thomas Rausch sheds meaningful light to this point. He argues that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope emeritus Benedict XVI) under whose Congregation of Doctrine of Faith presidency *Dominus Iesus* was issued had certain theological presuppositions that influenced the issuance of DI. From the days of his study of Bonaventure, Rausch observes that Ratzinger has been strongly against what he considers as any effort to "immanentize" the eschaton, to use Eric Vögelin's terms. According to Rausch, Ratzinger's concern is that if salvation is interpreted as being *within* history rather than *beyond* it, it reduces the role of the Church to that of a social worker, with a reduced awareness of hierarchical mediation. Thomas P. Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI: An introduction to his Theological Vision* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 53-54. See also Eric Vögelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 120.

Africa. In the latter document, the objective of the dialogue is outlined as meant to foster mutual understanding and mutual enrichment and is set thus:

> With regard to African traditional religion, a serene and prudent dialogue will be able, on the one hand, to protect Catholics from negative influences which condition the way of life of many of them and, on the other hand, to foster the assimilation of positive values such as belief in a Supreme Being who is Eternal, Creator, Provident and Just Judge, values which are readily harmonized with the content of the faith. . . The adherents of African traditional religion should therefore be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided. For this purpose, suitable courses in African traditional religion should be given in houses of formation for priests and religious (EA, 67).

Ecclesia in Africa's language facilitates an environment in which a discernment and assimilation of the positive values of each tradition can occur. It is an environment in which Christianity still determines the direction of the dialogue because the Africans are becoming Christians. However, it is respectful and important for the two traditions to be considered as equal partners in the dialogue. The richness and variety of ancestral beliefs must not simply be admired but must become part of the ordinary people's lives. As Lesslie Newbigin has rightly pointed out:

> It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralist society—not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished.[33]

It is that equality that will provide an atmosphere of mutual tolerance in the search of those common elements that reinforce the values embedded in each tradition. The two traditions will do well to open up a pluralistic theological and spiritual environment which allows for the coexistence of complementing and sometimes conflicting religious claims. Friedrich Schleiermacher sounded a cautionary call many years ago: "Let none offer the seekers a system

[33] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, IL: Eerdmans, 1989) 1.

making exclusive claim to truth, but let each man offer his characteristic, individual presentation."[34] Raymond Firth expressed it even more poignantly:

> Christianity, as far as I am concerned, is on a par with other religions - such as Islam, with which I have had some contact in Malaysia; or the paganism of the Tikopia which I have studied in the Solomons. Each represents a framework of ideas, institutionalized, complex, often with strong emotional loading, which people use in trying to make sense of life, soften its hardships, get reassurance and comfort, and express some of their deepest feelings. But no religion has the unique road to the truth.[35]

When modifications are made to suit the particular religious and cultural context of the adherents of the faith in Africa, it will definitely produce various hybrid strands of African believers who appreciate their indigenous traditions, and at the same time embrace those elements that are cherished within *communio sanctorum*.

9.2.2 The major features of African ancestors and *communio sanctorum*

Jack Partain has rightly written that a major focus of many theologians is on the need to address some of the specific frustrations of African Christian spirituality. Partain recognizes that in regard to the question of Christians' relationships with their ancestors, there is an essential link in a hierarchical chain of powers stretching from this world to the spirit world through the ancestors. Partain comes to the conclusion that

> A more prominent approach is to define the relationship with the ancestors in terms of the communion of the saints. From the beginning of the African theology movement, it has been suggested that this Christian doctrine can be revived, revised and given new prominence from within the African context.[36]

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[34] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion* trans. John Oman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 175.

[35] Raymond Firth, "Conversion from Paganism to Christianity," *RAIN*, no. 14 (May - Jun., 1976): 3.

[36] Jack Partain, "Christians and Their Ancestors: A Dilemma of African Theology," *Christian Century*, (November 26, 1986): 1066. Reviving, revising, and giving prominence for which Pertain advocates has a sense of restoring to life or causing to regain consciousness. Obviously one can only perform these functions to a thing that

Unfortunately, Partain does not show how the relationship between the ancestors and saints can be "revived, revised, and given new prominence." Continuing on Partain's insight I will now recapitulate some of the major features of *communio sanctorum* and those of African ancestors.

Communio Sanctorum	***African ancestors***
Veneration of saints is a popular cult that arose from Christian regions in the west and eventually became a well-known tradition in the entire Catholic Church.	Veneration of ancestors is a popular cult which wells up from the depths of the African hearts and is practiced in nearly all African communities.
It is *communion* – depicting the union of Christians in heaven, in purgatory, and on earth.	It is *communion* – the kinship or consanguinity between the living-dead and their kin.
It is *koinonia* – expressing the spiritual solidarity among Christians in Christ's Church.	It encourages spiritual solidarity among the living when personal identities are fulfilled within the community.
It is "*sancta sanctis*" – depicting the sharing of holy things on earth by the Church, chief among them: the Eucharist.	It entails continuing the tradition by sharing the things (material and spiritual) left by the ancestors and honoring the ancestors by celebrations.
Tombs and statues of saints, relics, and other religious objects help Christians to pray and steep themselves in the spiritual force of the saints.	Sacred places and objects have a revelatory function. They help to bridge the ontological *space* between human beings and God and put people in touch with ancestors.
Christians venerate their saints and remain in union with the saints through prayers.	Africans venerate their ancestors and remain in union with the ancestors through prayers.
Christians count on the mediation of the saints, their prayers and merits.	Africans count on the mediation of their ancestors, their love and care for them.

was considered or presumed dead, so is Partain suggesting that the doctrine of Communion of Saints was dead at one point?

Saints give the hope of salvation to the faithful, a radical new form of life in which God will restore the paradise order with a new creation.	Ancestors empower their descendants and ensure they are victors over evil and evil powers, diseases, poverty, and all that lessens the fullness of life.
Christians are given the names of saints who become their patron saints.	Africans are given names of ancestors or the deceased.
The lives of the saints manifest the inherent values of the gospel tradition.	The lives of the ancestors reflect the inherent values in the traditional cultures.
Saints are regarded as guides and guards of the moral conduct of the faithful who look to them as examples.	The ancestors are regarded as the guides and guards of the moral conduct of their descendants.

The highlights above show the similarities that can be found in the institutionalized beliefs and practices in the *communio sanctorum* and the traditional practices related to the cult of African ancestors. These main tenets of African traditional thinking about the ancestors and the spirit world do not contradict Christian beliefs, but rather complement the Catholic tradition of the cult of the saints.

The cult of African ancestors and *communio sanctorum* forms a sort of symbiotic relationship in which each draws from the other and provides for the other. The ancestral beliefs and practices provide a context for theological articulation. The awareness of the power and presence the ancestors' influence on the living causes the living to extend that awareness into their new family, the Church. The ancestors are an integral part of the clan, of the human community, a belief shared also by Christianity when speaking of the Communion of Saints.

Robert Hood, in his study of how cultural and religious thought and activities of African peoples bear upon Christian theology, touches on a point that is central to this study:

> Ancestors in African . . . traditional religions are part of the heavenly council under the governance of the supreme deity, along with the divinities and spirits. They make up an important link between the living and the dead, the eternal, and the here and now.[37]

Some authors view the African ancestral practices as valid and complete by themselves and only see a need to "Christianize" them.[38] Such scholars see mortuary rites and the consequent ancestral beliefs, such as gestures of respect toward the dead, as all constitutive parts of indigenous processes for celebrating death and grieving without any danger to Christian doctrine. Some theologians on the other hand are critical of African indigenous practices. Nyamiti is a fine example:

> Many African Christians are still very much inclined towards unlawful ancestral veneration, especially in times of difficulties, serious disease or famine. Encouraging ancestral veneration in the Church might serve to confirm such believers in their practice of the illicit cult of ancestors.[39]

9.2.3 African ancestors and *communio sanctorum*: Syncretism and dual system

If we consider both the cult of African ancestors and *communio sanctorum* on a par and as legitimate vehicles through which the adherents of each tradition can ultimately experience communion with God, then perhaps it is logical to propose a syncretistic mode of being, whereby African Christians combine the two traditions while melding the beliefs and practices of each tradition.

Syncretism has had a predominantly negative connotation for many Christians in the past. In the recent past, however, there has been an increased awareness of cultural interpenetration

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[37] Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?: Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 217.

[38] Jabulani A. Nxumalo, "Christ and the Ancestors in the African World," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (September 1980): 12.

[39] Nyamiti, "The Church as Christ's Ancestral Mediation" in *The Church in African Christianity - Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, eds., J.N.K. Mugambi and Magesa (NAIROBI: Initiatives Publishers, 1990), 145.

and the critiquing of earlier conceptions of culture, especially cultures which are not static, stable, bounded, and homogeneous entities.[40] Those interpretations have produced a movement between dropping the word altogether due to its ambiguity, as for example Schineller suggests,[41] or reclaiming and redefining it due to its potential usefulness, as for examples, Schreiter and Droogers advocate.[42] Opponents of syncretism object to its use, arguing that "(1) syncretism is a pejorative term, one that derides mixture, and/or (2) syncretism presupposes 'purity' in the traditions that combine."[43]

Schreiter's study is more comprehensive and in-depth and relevant to this present study. He applies "syncretism" in a positive sense, seeing in it a necessary development and enrichment of local theologies and the formation of a new religious identity. Schreiter equates hybridity and syncretism and offers "a typology of Christian syncretism" by examining three foci around which syncretistic phenomenon can be studied:

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[40] Postmodern cultural critics point out the tendency of modern paradigm of cultural analysis (among other things) to dehistoricize culture and consider it as already there as a complete object simply to be analyzed. Kathryn Tanner has distinguished herself as a leading face of postmodern criticism. According to Kevin Seasoltz, Tanner "has stressed that contemporary studies of culture have critiqued and displaced earlier static notions and have stressed the importance of cultural processes as dynamic, often fragmented, and at times conflictual." See Kevin Seasoltz, *A Virtuous Church: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Liturgy for the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 6.

[41] Peter Schineller, "Inculturation and Syncretism: What is the Real Issue?" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16 no. 2 (1992): 50-53. Some scholars see not only the ambiguity of "syncretism" but also consider it dangerous and destructive for faith. Charles Onuh, for example, compares syncretism with inculturation and writes:

> While inculturation has an objective to make the Christian faith penetrate the root of culture, so that a Christian can feel at home in his culture and from this as a basis practice fully his faith, syncretism is an attempt solely to accommodate two different systems. Inculturation attempts to boost the faith with the use of the positive potentials of the culture, while syncretism *endangers and destroys the faith* [italics are mine for emphasis].

See Charles O. Onuh, *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), 232.

[42] Schreiter, "Defining Syncretism: An Interim Report," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 17 no. 2 (1993): 50-53; André Droogers, "Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem" in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach* eds., Jerald Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Fernhout and Anton Wessels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 7-25.

[43] Charles Stewart, "Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture," *Diacritics* 29, no. 3 (Autumn, 1999): 40-41.

> (1) where Christianity and another tradition come together to form a new reality with the other tradition providing the basic framework; (2) where Christianity provides the framework for the syncretistic system, but is reinterpreted and reshaped substantially, independent of any dialogue with established Christianity; (3) where selected elements of Christianity are incorporated into another system.[44]

In *The New Catholicity*, Schreiter describes the relationship between the new identity and syncretism and recognizes the syncretistic process as the "motor" in the creation for a new identity.[45] Schreiter spells out four ways by which syncretistic process takes place: (1) Incorporation by considering the similarities between the sign system of the culture and that of Christianity; (2) Incorporation by filling the gaps; (3) Accommodation through indiscriminate mixing; (4) Incorporation by domination.[46]

Schreiter's first three ways of syncretistic process best describe the syncretistic process that can preserve a bicultural African in a dual religious system that consists of the cult of African ancestors and the *communio sanctorum*. The advantage of the process of syncretism is, as Schreiter has stressed, the development of culture through forming a new cultural identity and intercultural semiotics. Beyond those three processes is a hybridity that is brought about by intermingling and a fusion that results in a transformation of two religious and cultural worlds.

Two observations must be made in regard to syncretism. First, African Christians will by necessity become bicultural, holding both African and Christian heritage as their mainstream cultural identities. Given that each of these cultures generally promotes similar expectations for their adherents, there is the challenge of holding two cultural identities at the same time, something that has not been adequately addressed by Schreiter and the other advocates of syncretism. How these bicultural individuals are supposed to switch between cultural identities

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[44] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 147-8.
[45] Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 63.
[46] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 152-4.

requires clearly described theological strategies in order to avoid religious conflicts or identity crises. I will make some proposals in the next chapter.

Second, it must be remembered that the western cultures through which Christianity was largely communicated to African cultures are not complete and static prior to the acculturation process as they encounter African cultures.[47] The real challenge in the process of syncretism, as I will explain below, lies in attentive sensitivity to the cultural elements which are considered for the process of inculturation. Those elements, if considered for their religious worth, must necessarily lead to salvation. They must lead to the divine predisposition that surpasses human ingenuity and compels bicultural people to forge ahead despite the odds that are stacked against them. We must therefore turn our attention to the concept of salvation and analyze its meaning for Africans.

9.2.4 Salvation in the traditional African view

When we consider African ancestors and the concept of Christian salvation, the one question we must ask is: what is an African's expectation of Christian salvation and how is ancestorship related with that expectation?

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[47] Stewart seems to suggest that African communities are on the receiving end of the cultural spectrum due to their late entry into the process of intermingling with other cultures. His treatment of syncretism and "melting-pot" is misleading. Stewart has pointed out that whereas most sub-Saharan African societies were still under colonial rule up through the 1950s, other societies such as the United States had long been engaged in attempts to consolidate national cultural identities by publicly espousing versions of a "melting pot" ideology as a strategy of nation-building. See Stewart, "Syncretism and Its Synonyms," 47. However, as Louis Foley rightly points out, the "melting-pot" metaphor is not an accurate anthropological theoretical tool for describing cultural transformations. Foley submits that "melting-pot" assumes that the American population includes elements of many different racial strains and former nationalities fused together. If this were so, Foley argues, then the American population would have all of the strains in its cultural make-up, proportionate to the number of inhabitants represented by each culture, which is not the case because immigrants of some nationalities have been rather easily and thoroughly assimilated while others have tended to keep to themselves. See Louis Foley, "Melting-Pot Myth," *The Modern Language Journal* 29, no. 4 (Apr., 1945): 227.

First of all, in order to have a religious perspective and common ground on which to view African traditional beliefs and the Christian faith, we must consider some African presuppositions about salvation. Those presuppositions will, hopefully, provide a window through which we can see how ancestors are impacted by the scheme of Christian salvation.

When an African seeks salvation in religion, does that African seek salvation in the way it is understood in Christianity? From even a little sample of views of some theologians we get a sense that Africans seek a different kind of salvation. According to Tokunboh Adeyemo, they seek a cosmic equilibrium and community acceptance of individuals.[48] That cosmic equilibrium may imply entering into a process through which they are brought from conditions of suffering to a condition of wellbeing. According to Mbiti, the concept of salvation from the African perspective has to do with physical and immediate dangers that threaten the individual or community survival, good health and general prosperity or safety.[49] Mbiti asserts that

> Salvation in African Religion has to do with physical and immediate dangers (of the individual and more often of the community) – dangers that threaten individual or community survival, good health, and general prosperity or safety. This is the main religious setting in which the notion of salvation is understood and experienced. Salvation is not just an abstraction: it is concrete, told in terms of both what has happened and is likely to be encountered by people as they go through daily experiences.[50]

Abraham Ako Akrong summarizes salvation in African thought into four main areas of concern, namely (1) Salvation is viewed as the ideal condition for human well-being and ultimate self-fulfillment; (2) it also has to do with protection from evil forces of destruction; (3) with

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[48] Tokunboh Adeyemo, *African Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: Wordalive Publication, 2006), 1353.

[49] Mbiti, "Some Reflections on African Experience of Salvation Today," in *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals: A Continuing Dialogue*, ed., S. J. Samartha (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1974), 108-19.

[50] Mbiti, "Some Reflections on African Experience of Salvation Today," 108-19.

preservation of cosmic and social order and harmony; and (4) with restoration of the broken life.[51]

This African emphasis on the here-and-now is echoed in certain theological interpretations, particularly that of existential and realized eschatology.[52] These interpretations can be contrasted with futurist eschatology explained by scholars such as Albert Schweitzer and Johannes Weiss whereby the disciples were to pray for the Kingdom which will be established at the end of the present natural world.[53] The "futurist" kingdom is often emphasized in the Christian teachings and may sometimes give the impression that the Church invests more on hope in the future.[54] By stressing the hereafter, the Christian promotes a view of religion as the opium of the people (after Karl Max) whereas the African religious instinct, by stressing the fullness of life in the here and now in terms of wealth, health, and so on, could give an impression that the fullness of life is attained in the present time. The challenge in the African context, as David Tonghou Ngong has rightly pointed out, is to foster a holistic understanding of Christian salvation as both eschatological, based on the hope of ultimate peace in the eternal

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[51] Cited in Henry J. Mugabe, "Salvation from an African Perspective," *Indian Journal of Theology* 36, no. 1 (1994): 33.

[52] Existential eschatology maintains that God encounters the human being in the here and now in the preaching instituted by Jesus. This interpretation is epitomized by Rudolf Bultmann's assertion that "The idea of the omnipresent and almighty God becomes real in my personal existence only by His Word spoken here and now." See Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM Press, 1958), 79. For more studies on some contemporary approaches to "salvation" see John Perumbalath, "Salvation Today: Some Reflections on the Christian Doctrine of Salvation," *Indian Journal of Theology* 37 no.1 (1995): 82-87. Realized eschatology, as Charles Dodd argued, maintains that "The *eschaton* has moved from the future to the present, from the sphere of expectation into that of realized experience." See Charles H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1963), 40-41.

[53] See Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1971) and Martin Werner, *The Formation of the Christian Dogma* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

[54] David Fergusson and Marcel Sarot, *The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000).

divine life in the future, and at the same time valuing the material well being in the here and now while recognizing that temporality is provisional and limited.[55]

Following the logic of these studies, what exactly are the physical and immediate dangers that threaten the individual African's or community's survival, good health, and general prosperity or safety as Mbiti proposes? Perhaps we can begin by looking at an area that is related to ancestors: the African's cry for victory over evil forces and the traditional healer in Africa as a way of responding to illnesses and dispelling fears that are a constant challenge to an African. Again we see how Mbiti builds on Gustaf Aulén's groundbreaking book (which was first published in 1931) to express the African's need for victory over the powers and forces of evil and for which he considers Jesus as "*Christus Victor*":

> The Christian message brings Jesus as the one who fought victoriously against the forces of the devil, spirits, sickness, hatred, fear, and death itself. In each of these areas he won a victory and lives now above the assault of these forces. He is the victor, the one hope, the one example, the one conqueror: and this makes sense to African peoples, it draws their attention and it is pregnant with meaning. It gives to their myths, an absolutely new dimension. The greatest need among African peoples, is to see, to know, and to experience Jesus Christ as the victor over the powers and forces from which Africa knows no means of deliverance.[56]

We can infer from these insights that whereas salvation for a Western Christian implies removing the moral barriers and restoring a personal communion with God that is interpreted to happen at various times, for an African, on the other hand, it implies victory over powers and forces before which the

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[55] David Tonghou Ngong, *The Holy Spirit and Salvation in African Christian Theology: Imagining a More Hopeful Future for Africa* (New York : Peter Lang, 2010), 4.

[56] Mbiti, "Some Concepts of Christology" in *Christ and the Younger Churches* ed. Georg Vicedom (London: SPCK, 1972), 55. Aulén points out an aspect of Christ that resonates very well with the African religious preoccupation. Aulén writes that "the work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil." See Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herber (London: SPCK, 1931; New York: Macmillan, 1969), 20.

African is otherwise helpless. The next question before us must be: can the African ancestors provide the salvation that the African is in need of?

9.2.5 Ancestors as inadequate means of salvation

When Kabasélé Lumbala compares the mediation of African ancestors with that of Christ, he argues that whereas the mediation of Christ is "universal and ultimate," that of the ancestors "is limited to their descendants and *does not achieve the plenitude of the Kingdom of God*"[57] (Italics are mine for emphasis). This view is also held by Jaco Beyers and Dora Mphahlele, who argue that "As mediators between God and humankind, ancestors do not possess the power to mediate salvation."[58]

These are problematic statements. Do these scholars imply that the mediation of African ancestors is incomplete in itself or only in comparison to that of Christ? Are they not co-opting African Traditional Religions into a Christian salvific discourse without a proper methodological procedure? There seems to be an unreasonable expectation on the part of these scholars: just as one does not condemn a microwave for not performing the functions of an oven, so too one may not apportion blame to African ancestors for "failing" to function within the order of economy of salvation which is a language that is peculiar to Christian tradition and not to Africans.

Perhaps the question to ask is: What kind of powers or influences do the ancestors have on the Africans' expectation of salvation? Molefi Kate Asante holds a contrary view to these

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[57] Francois Kabasele Lumbala, *Celebrating Christ in Africa: Liturgy and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 47.

[58] Jaco Beyers and Dora N. Mphahlele "Jesus Christ as Ancestor: An African Christian Understanding," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (2009): 37.

authors. Sante asserts that African ancestors are a proper means by which God intends to save the African peoples. He writes:

> Most African Christian theologians now acknowledge that African traditional religion is not merely a *praeparatio evangelica* for conversion to Christianity, but rather a proper locus of God's revelation to African ancestors and therefore a means of salvation or meaning for African people. . . . God not only tolerated the religion of African ancestors but was active in its creation. Ancestors are to be respected as the normal divinely given means of salvation, put by God in all his will for the salvation of all the peoples, for God truly has spoken to our ancestors in the sense expressed in the letter to Hebrews. African traditional religion contains 'not only the seeds but also the fruit' of the word of God.[59]

Asante's assertion adds an important perspective to our analysis. How do African ancestors influence their kin's salvation? To answer this question we must return to what we have already established, namely that as mediators the ancestors can only dispense what they themselves have received from God. It follows therefore that of themselves they can neither guarantee protection nor impose punishment. This is the perspective which has been adopted spontaneously by Africans who embraced Christianity and saw in Jesus *Christ the sacrament of encounter with the Father*,[60] and the summit of God's revelation for salvation.

9.2.6 African ancestors and salvation in Christ

Phillip Tovey seems to find fault with African ancestors and refers to them as the "non-Christian ancestors," which according to him are a "real problem" especially "in areas of first or second

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[59] Molefi Kate Asante et al., *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, vol. 1 (Thousand Oaks, CA; London, UK; New Delhi, India; Far East Square, Singapore: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2008), 285.

[60] See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (London; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965 [first published in 1963]). Schreiter who is a renowned interpreter of Schillebeeckx highlights one of the pertinent questions as follows: "What does it mean to be a Christian, a Christian community, in the contemporary world?" See Schreiter, "Edward Schillebeeckx: An Orientation to His Thought," in *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, ed. Schreiter (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 10.

generation Christianity."[61] This statement raises important questions: First, in what sense are African ancestors a real problem? Second, how are African ancestors related to salvation in Jesus Christ?

African ancestors are generally considered as "pagans," which the *Catholic Dictionary* defines in a loosely religious sense to mean "those who, though conscious of Christian revelation, reject or are indifferent to it and draw their beliefs and moral standards from purely natural sources."[62] A "pagan" is never viewed favorably in the eyes of Christian tradition since the time of St. Augustine.[63] An African ancestor, a "pagan," is outside the salvation offered by Christ in the Church: "extra Eclesiam nulla salus."[64]

However, there has been a renewed understanding of "pagans" especially since Karl Rahner's coining of a new religious category of "anonymous Christians." Rahner meant to embrace Buddhists, various other non-Christians and even atheists who are conscientious, upright and caring. Rahner's theological hypothesis of "Anonymous Christianity" is especially

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[61] Philip Tovey, *Inculturation of Christian Worship: Exploring the Eucharist* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003), 50.

[62] Donald Attwater, ed., *A Catholic Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1958), 363.

[63] St. Augustine is known for his rebuke of pagans for their misinterpretation of God's ways, his declaration of eternal punishment in hell for them versus the eternal happiness of the saints. See R.W. Dyson (ed., tr.), *The City of God Against the Pagans* (Cambridge; New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[64] Drawing from the Church's tradition laid by such teachers such as St. Irenaeus, St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Jerome, and Origen, the Council of Florence issued *de fide* the most explicit and forceful definition of "outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation": "The Most Holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and preaches that none of those existing outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews, heretics, and schismatics can ever be partakers of eternal life, but that they are to go into the eternal fire 'which was prepared for the devil and his angels,' (Mt. 25:41) unless before death they are joined with Her; and that so important is the unity of this Ecclesiastical Body, that only those remaining within this unity can profit from the sacraments of the Church unto salvation, and that they alone can receive an eternal recompense for their fasts, alms-deeds, and other works of Christian piety and duties of a Christian soldier. No one, let his almsgiving be as great as it may, no one, even if he pour out his blood for the Name of Christ, can be saved unless they abide within the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church." (Pope Eugene IV, Council of Florence, Feb. 4, 1442). See Jean Vincent Bainvel, *Is there salvation outside the Catholic Church*? Tr. J. L. Weidenhan (St. Louis, MO; London: B. Herder book co., 1917), 16.

relevant to our discussion. Rahner considered the non-Christians after the preaching of the Church as "anonymous Christians". In his own words:

> The 'anonymous Christian' in our sense of the term is the pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who lives in the state of Christ's grace through faith, hope and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ.[65]

Although we may apply Rahner's theory to understand how African ancestors may be viewed in relation to Christian understanding of salvation, we keep in mind that the theory is not a panacea for interreligious dialogue. Some years after penning the theory he explained that

> … [T]he theory [of "anonymous Christianity"] arose from two facts: first, the possibility of supernatural salvation and of a corresponding faith which must be granted to non-Christians, even if they never become Christian; and secondly, that salvation cannot be gained without reference to God and Christ, since it must in its origin, history and fulfillment be a theistic and Christian salvation.[66]

He never meant, as Joseph Wong has pointed out, his theory to be used as an immediate tool for dialogue with other religions.[67] Rather, he meant it to clarify and broaden the then standard outlook of the Catholic Church on the followers of extra-Christian religions. For this present study "anonymous Christian" theory can serve to (1) highlight a point of connection between Christianity and the cult of African ancestors so that we can find in ancestors not only a preparation for the Gospel but a continuity in religious practices; and (2) explicate the validity of ancestor veneration as a means of deepening African cultural adherents' understanding of the power and action of God.

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[65] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 283.

[66] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, trans. David Morland (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 218.

[67] Joseph H. Wong, "Anonymous Christians: Karl Rahner's Pneuma-Christocentrism and an East-West Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 614.

Several scholars have studied Rahner's theory of "Anonymous Christians" by situating it in the context of different approaches in the debate. For example, Peter Schineller has distinguished the different trends of related studies as ecclesiocentric, Christocentric, and theocentric.[68] Wong questions the suitability of this religious category but is hopeful that it can be developed further by applying Rahner's more recent writings, as well as those of contemporary theologians in order to formulate a "Rahnerian pneumatological Christocentrism."[69] Schreiter has discussed how wisdom can be a resource of mission theology and can support, not correct, the "anonymous Christian" theory and thus play an important role in the discussion of the universal salvific will of God.[70]

The substance of "anonymous Christians" has been endorsed by the Magisterium. Vatican II, with its openness and positive outlook and in its efforts to accept non-Christian religions, proposed that

> All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

The latest teaching of the Church as enshrined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that

> Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. (CCC, 847)

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[68] Schineller, "Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Views," *Theological Studies* 37 (1976): 550.
[69] Wong, "Anonymous Christians," 610.
[70] Schreiter, "The Anonymous Christian and Christology," *Missiology: An International Review* 6, no. 2 (April 1978): 235-241.

Rahner's hypothesis makes it clear that God, who desires all God's children to be saved, cannot possibly consign all non-Christians to a state of eternal separation from God's self. Jesus Christ is God's only means of salvation. This must mean that the African ancestors may be considered as anonymous Christians and therefore have the possibility of the salvation in Christ through an implicit acceptance of Christ. They are saved by the grace of Christ even though they may not have formally believed in him, even after the preaching of the gospel. Rahner's inclusivist view allows even atheists and polytheists the possibility of God's salvation, and implies that the African ancestors are saved through following traditional religions and are examples of "anonymous Christians."

How can we assess the appropriateness of this theory for the African context? Among the African scholars who have echoed Rahner's insights is Mbiti, who has developed them most fully. He argues that the notion of anonymous Christianity recognizes that salvation comes from Christ, even for non-believers, but still demands the work of evangelization expressed in Matthew's "Great Commission" and repeated often by Paul. Mbiti says that "[Christ] is present through the presence of God. He is the unnamed Christ, working in the insights that people have worked concerning God, in so far as these insights do not contradict the nature and being of God as revealed more openly in the New Testament."[71] Mbiti's argument is solid: where God is

[71] Mbiti bases his position on the sayings of Jesus himself and other biblical witnesses and argues as follows:

i. "Before Abraham was, I am" (Jn 8). Since Abraham saw Jesus and rejoiced but Jesus hid himself from the rest of the Jews, Mbiti wonders whether Jesus hid himself in the walls of African Traditional Religion as well.
ii. "Other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also" (Jn 10:16). Mbiti wonders whether the sheep "not of this fold" must come to know the Shepherd's name for him to be their Shepherd or whether they must come to know his voice. Applied to African traditional religion, this implies that those who in some sense know his voice already belong to his flock even though they neither know his name nor yet belong to the fold.
iii. "The Father is in me and I am in the Father" (Jn 10:38) and ""He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14: 8-11). Mbiti argues that seeing the Father is tantamount to seeing the Son so that where people have recognized the Father they recognize *ipso facto* the Son. On the basis of this argument, Mbiti asserts that God is recognized

confessed, faith in Christ is implied. But if an African professes faith in God yet denies faith in Christ, the equation cannot be that simple.

9.3 A SEARCH FOR A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF AFRICAN ANCESTORS

9.3.1 Expressing African Christian ancestral theology

How can we reflect upon and express the Christian faith in African thought forms and idiom in line with the observations and analysis we have made so far and in dialogue with the rest of Christendom? How can we develop a systematic theology that is expressed in the language and concepts of traditional African religion and culture?

I shall now try to respond to these questions by bringing together the major insights around which the cults of ancestors and *communio sanctorum* are based.

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as the "Savior of the world" in African Traditional Religion. In recognizing the saving activities of God, African Traditional Religions point to the most significant purpose of Jesus.

iv. Each of the evangelists describes the same Person albeit in different ways. If different portraits of Jesus even among those who saw him are possible, Mbiti wonders, how many more images of Christ (such as ancestor for our work) could we expect from those who did not have direct link with him?

v. In response to the statement "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2: 9-11) Mbiti suggests that where people bow their knees before God, confess Him as God, and live according to the light of their conscience and traditional moral values, prayer, sacrifice and inward yearning, could such people be performing their spiritual exercise under the Lordship of Jesus whether they name him or not?

See Mbiti, "Is Jesus Christ in African Religion?" in *Exploring Afro-Christology*, ed. Pobee (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang), 22-28. Mbiti's arguments, while insightful and compelling, need to be read with some caution. On the level of common sense we see how Jesus is implicitly present in African traditional religion. However, one has to make, as Lonergan would say, a differentiation of consciousness from the realm of common sense to that of theory. (See Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 1994, c1971), 114.) Without a clear affirmation of Jesus as the revelation of the Father, we risk perverting the fundamental nature of both Christian faith and African traditional cultures. Is Mbiti asking us to project onto the person of Jesus traditional African categories, or to derive an understanding of the mystery of Christ that can be analogically expressed by the use of a traditional category? Moreover, are we to regard traditional religious beliefs as equivalent to the as yet imperfect revelation of the Old Testament? Furthermore, how can the Africans know the Judeo-Christian "Father" without entering into Jesus' revelational relationship with him through Baptism? And finally in what sense can the sheep be said to recognize the Shepherd's voice and yet not know his name? These questions indicate that Mbiti's arguments could be developed further and could prove to be useful in explicating the continuity of traditional African religions into Christianity.

9.3.2 Vital force as a theological framework

Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* is a study which had status and influence in its time and has influenced many scholars of African Philosophy and literature although, as Christopher Miller points out, many scholars would no longer consider it real anthropology.[72] I pay special attention to Temple's work because it was an original work. As Schreiter rightly observes, Tempels revitalized the Neo-Thomistic philosophical framework and developed it with an equivalent Bantu philosophy.[73] Temple's work can potentially uncover the inner structure of African cosmology which contributes considerable weight to this present study.

In his text, Tempels points out that the European failure to recognize the African worldview as a valid philosophy is one of the challenges that must be overcome in the efforts to

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[72] Christopher L. Miller, "Theories of Africans: The Question of Literary Anthropology," *Critical Inquiry*, 13, no. 1 (Autumn, 1986): 126. Tempels study, especially his central thesis of "vital force," has received a lot of scholarly attention. One such critic is Stephen Okafor who claims to offer objective and critical examination of the study. Okafor observes that while most British anthropologists who wrote on Africa (such as Tylor, Frazer, and Marett) followed the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, French scholars (such as Levi-Strauss, Marcel Griaule, and our case study—Placide Tempels) followed the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Okafor charges that Tempels did not break completely free from the institutionalized errors and mistakes of the scientific methodology of structural-functional scholars such as Malinowski and Radcliffe- Brown who were ultimately aligned to the Rousseauan school of thought. One is inclined to consider such charges as too harsh and even unfair especially when one takes into consideration the fact that Okafor failed to show convincingly how Tempels deliberately perpetuated the errors and prejudices of the past scholars for which he is accused. Okafor proceeds to reject Tempels' "vital force" theory and proposes the "concept of LIFE" as an "all-inclusive" alternative conceptual framework for interpreting and ordering the African cosmology. Having read Okafor's alternative framework with sympathy, I find it too wide, vague, and potentially confusing to be applied scientifically. See Stephen O. Okafor, "'Bantu Philosophy': Placide Tempels Revisited," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 13, no. 2 (1982): 85-91.

Mbiti has also offered insightful criticism of Tempels study by pointing at the weaknesses of "vital force." Mbiti charges that

> The book is primarily Tempels' personal interpretations of the Baluba, and it is ambitious to call it 'Bantu Philosophy' since it only deals with one people among whom he had worked for many years as a missionary. It is open to a great deal of criticism, and the theory of 'vital force' cannot be applied to other African peoples with whose life and ideas I am familiar. The main contribution of Tempels is more in terms of sympathy and change of attitude than perhaps in the actual contents and theory of his book. (Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 10.)

Mbiti is justified in pointing at the summary nature of the book. Perhaps had Mbiti considered the fact that Tempels made modest efforts to consult and get approval from other scholars, missionaries, and colonial workers at the time, he could have been more objective in his criticisms of Tempels. Granted the book is not perfect, we must return to the fact that Tempels was a child of his time, however; his was an original work that provided an important conceptual framework on which other studies may be based.

[73] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 9.

understand African metaphysics and for effective evangelization to occur. He writes that "the gulf between Africans and Whites will remain and widen so long as we do not meet them in the wholesome aspirations of their own ontology."[74] Tempels makes an important point: All questions of African cultural and philosophical particularities can be answered by "a single principle, knowledge of the Inmost Nature of beings, that is to say. . . their Ontological Principle"[75] which he later identifies as a "single value: vital force."[76] He then comes to the conclusion that

> The key principle of Bantu philosophy is that of vital force. The activating and final aim of all Bantu effort is only the intensification of vital force. To protect it or to increase vital force, that is the motive and the profound meaning in all their practices. It is the ideal which animates the life of the '*muntu*', the only thing for which he is ready to suffer and to sacrifice himself.[77]

Tempels provides us with a methodological and epistemological framework on which we can interpret African thought, action, and practice, especially in relation to the concept of diminution of "vital force" or its strengthening. The attenuation or decrease of "vital force" is at the center of several other practices in Africa, such as witchcraft, sorcery, the medicine man, the king and the chief's authority, and (most importantly for our purpose) ancestorship.

Several other scholars have built on Tempels' concept. Vincent Mulago and Alexis Kagame, for example, tried to present the traditional worldview along the lines of Scholastic philosophy. Their interpretation of *vital force* and hierarchy of beings drew mainly on the

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[74] Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 16, 19.

[75] Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 23. Tempels believed that "What has been called magic, animism, ancestor-worship, or dynamism—in short, all the customs of the Bantu—depend upon a single principle, knowledge of the Inmost Nature of beings, that is to say, upon their Ontological Principle." Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 33.

[76] Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*. The theory of "Vital Force" is the central thesis of the study. It is first established in the first chapter and then related to God or divinities, man, and the society at large between the second to the sixth chapters.

[77] Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 175.

indigenous religious traditions of the peoples of Central Africa.[78] Mulago described a Bantu traditional religion that is based on the belief in two worlds, visible and invisible, and their interaction, the belief in the communitarian and hierarchic character of these two worlds, and the belief in a Supreme Being, Creator and Father of all that exists.[79] Kagame on his part appeared to differ with Tempels but essentially complemented Temple's concept by positing that "force" is a fundamental trait of African thought.[80] Although Tempels and later on Mulago and Kagame limited their application of these two basic dynamic features of African thought to Bantu peoples, they have been judged to be applicable for other African cultures and regions as well; hence their usefulness in this study.[81] Furthermore, since African ancestors constitute the vitality of African societies, these concepts are therefore closely tied and corollary to the wellbeing of the societies.

Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia joins his voice to many scholars who see the ancestors as one of the central points of "vital force." Nkemenkia explains that

> In the whole of African culture there is a religious background which links everything and everyone. From this religious background one can understand the deep sense of divinity and a true sense of the cult practiced by the entire

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[78] David Westlund, *African Religion in African Scholarship* (Stockholm 1988), 71. Mulago and Kagame were among the first generation ordained African clergy and scholars of the Francophone background. The two took up the study of Bantu cosmology from where Tempels left off.

[79] Westlund, *African Religion in African Scholarship*, 71.

[80] Liboire Kagabo, "Alexis Kagame (1912–1981): Life and Thought," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu (Malden, MA; Oxford, UK; Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2004) 233-240.Kagame disputed the accuracy of Tempels' interpretation of Bantu philosophy from where Tempels derived his concept of "vital force." Kagame argued that the central notion of Bantu philosophy is being in the general sense rather than just as force. One comes to the understanding that by "general sense" Kagame was referring to scholastic philosophy from where he claimed Bantu philosophy could be divided into ontology, criteriology (or epistemology), rational psychology, and ethics (to which he adds cosmology and philosophical theology). See also Alexis Kagame, *La Philosophie Bántu-Rwandaise de l'Être; extraits* (Bruxelles, 1955) and Jesse Russell, ed. Alexis Kagame (New York, NY: Book on Demand Publishers).

[81] The application of these concepts are grounded on the movement of *Négritude* as defined by one of its heralds, Léopold S. Senghor, as the concept of a specific black identity founded on a core set of values shared throughout the black world. See Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia, *African Vitalogy: A Step Forward in African Thinking* (Nairobi: Pauline Publication Africa, 199), 43.

> community, because everything comes from God and moves towards God. This religious fact is based on "vital" force, which permeates the whole society. . . . Man is in his true self only when he is united with his source, his ancestors, with this force and with God.[82]

These four scholars tell us that the ancestors are strategically placed in the line of a hierarchy of *forces*. Due to their proximity with God they have access to the vital and superior intelligence and deeper knowledge of the forces and nature. Because of their ontological relationship with their kin, they increase their descendants' vital force for the well-being and continuity of their respective clans.

Vital force as an indigenous concept of African philosophy is a theological framework that is inextricably bound to the various African communities in their historical, socio-cultural, political, and psychological life-situations. It may prove to be a useful tool for understanding the spiritual suppositions behind the beliefs in magic, witchcraft, divination and other spiritual cultural influences that cause fear. It may be described as the mystical bond that unites the living in the physical world, the living-dead in the spiritual world, and God. No scholar has provided a conceptual analysis of the bond of communion that unites the tripartite Church of the living, the Church in purgatory, and the triumphant Church in heaven. Fortunately in the African traditional philosophy and religion, *vital force* may be considered as a fitting contextual methodology of speaking of the vast network that unites the living and the dead and the living amongst themselves. That methodology has not been described by the authors above and we must now attempt to analyze it. For this we must turn to Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka whose original concept of the ontopoiesis of life best describes the mystical bond of communion that unites the living

[82] Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia, "'African Vitology:' The African Mind and Spirituality," in *Imaginatio Creatrix: The Pivotal Force of the Genesis/Ontopoiesis of Human Life and Reality* (Analecta Husserliana) ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 271-2.

and their ancestors in Africa, even if they do not always explain that bond explicitly in words. We may borrow Tymieniecka's description of "the self-individualizing living being" to highlight the interdependency that underlies the connectedness in the web of relationships in traditional Africa. She writes:

> The unity-of-everything-there-is-alive is grounded in the intrinsic existentially and vitally significant linkage among entire systems of beingness that are mutually indispensable for each other's existence . . . living being with internal existential/vital interdependencies come about 'together' in order that they may sustain themselves reciprocally in their life courses, thus establishing the actual equipoise of the entire life context.[83]

Tymieniecka's insights provides a theoretical ground on which we may view vital force as a metaphor for expressing fullness of life that issues from the mystical bond of communion that unites the living and the living-dead.

Nyamiti seems to complement this metaphor by proposing that "fullness of life requires that one's relations are good towards one's fellow human beings and ancestors."[84] The idea of having vital force in order to have the fullness of life is therefore a central point in increasing one's chances of being fully alive. The need for fullness of life may be expressed in varied ways, for example, in terms of overcoming the malevolent spirits that threaten human life in their environment; the ultimate goal is usually the fullness of life.[85]

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[83] Tymieniecka, *Logos and Life* (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 41.

[84] Vähäkangas, *In Search of Foundations for African Catholicism*, 237.

[85] David Tonghou Ngong, *The Holy Spirit and Salvation in African Christian Theology: Imagining a More Hopeful Future for Africa* (New York, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, 2010), 1.

9.3.3 When ritual practices generate belief and belonging

Durkheim considered the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane to be the central characteristic of religion when he defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden."[86] Scholars have analyzed Durkheim's insights from varying angles and for various objectives. Douglas Marshall, for example, building on it has argued that "ritual practices generate belief and belonging in participants by activating multiple social-psychological mechanisms that interactively create the characteristic outcomes of ritual."[87]

From an African perspective, connection between the spiritual and the physical worlds is one of the strongest elements that support their ritual behaviors. Many scholars have studied this unitary view of life. Mbiti, for example, says that "the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical . . . these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or to separate them."[88] African ancestors are an important component of this holistic view of life. Ogbu Kalu writes that "Africans operate with a three-dimensional perception of space: the sky, the earth (land and water), and the ancestral spirit world, which is located under the earth."[89] François Kabasélé Lumbala concurs and adds that "the world is a whole with God at the summit, the ancestors and benevolent spirits follow the malevolent spirits and the "strong" of this world and finally, humans as terrestrial beings."[90]

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[86] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, [1912] 1995), 47.

[87] Douglas A. Marshall, "Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice," *Sociological Theory* 20, no. 3 (Nov., 2002): 360.

[88] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1969, p. 75.

[89] Ogbu Kalu, "Ancestral Spirituality and Society in Africa" in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions* (World Spirituality 3), ed. Jacob Olupona (New York: The Crossroad Publishing company, 2000), 56.

[90] François Kabasélé, *Celebrating Jesus Christ in Africa: Liturgy and Inculturation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books, 1989), 42.

The unity of the spiritual and the physical in Africa influences the people's conception of the sacred, their worship, and finds its expression in everyday life so that, as many scholars observe, there is no division between the sacred and profane.[91] But this is not the case in Christianity. There are many distinctions and dichotomies that make spiritual life cumbersome both in theory and practice. For example, there are distinctions between what is human and what is religious, between the sacred and the secular, the soul and the body—which leads Kevin Irwin to lament that such distinctions and dichotomies "establish wrong foundations for spirituality."[92]

Considering Africans' holistic approach, we begin to see how Marshall's insights apply to them, that is, how ritual practices generate belief and belonging as they participate in the various aspects of their everyday life. Bevans makes a very important complementary statement. He reminds us that "theology has always been embodied in ritual, as the rule *lex orandi, lex credendi* points out."[93] The classical adage "*lex orandi, lex credendi*" which bears importance to this study is based upon an argument that was used by Prosper of Aquitaine.[94]

The epigram demonstrates that the Church's liturgical expression is reflective of the cumulative journey the Church has experienced since the time of the Apostles. Today it ought to

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[91] Geoffery Parrinder, *Religion in an African City* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953); J. Schiele, "Afrocentricity as an Alternative World View for Equality," *Journal of Progressive Services* 5, no. 1 (1994); Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975).

[92] Kevin Irwin, *Liturgy, Prayer and Spirituality* (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1984), 42-43.

[93] Bevans, *Models of Contexual Theology*, 17.

[94] Part of Prosper's argument against the Pelagians went as follows:

> In addition to these inviolable decisions of the Blessed Apostolic See, by which our most holy fathers, rejecting the arrogance of this harmful novelty, have taught [us] to attribute to the grace of Christ both the first steps of a right will and the necessary progress to a praiseworthy ardor and even the perseverance in these efforts until the end, let us consider equally the rights of the priestly supplications which, transmitted by the apostles, are celebrated in the same manner in the entire world and in the whole Catholic Church, in such a way that the order of supplication determines the rule of faith.

See Prosper of Aquitain, *Capitula Coelestini* 8 in Paul De Clark, "'Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi': The Original Sense and Historical Avatars of an Historical Adage," (trans. Thomas Winger) *Studia Liturgica* 24 (1994): 181.

be reflective of the diverse cultural contributions that have been made to the form of liturgical expression of the local Church. Even more urgently, the epigram becomes a center of focus for us because of the relationship between belief and prayer (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). The adage may be lengthened to state that worship reflects what we believe and determines how we live (*lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*). With regard to the complex traffic between these three anchors of theological discourse (prayer, belief, and life) I would like to combine them and explore them as a single trajectory, namely, how beliefs in the presence and power of ancestors can awaken in the Africans a sense of awe for God and how such faith can influence their way of prayer and consequently their way of living.

The use of the epigram can provide the African believer with critical intellectual and affective spiritual skills to facilitate and nurture the rediscovery of the connection between their spirituality and their ritual practices. Here is a case where form must not be separated from substance. Ritual behavior which preserves the integrity of African theology is intricately and organically linked to the spirituality that produced it. Thomas Merton has warned that the artificial separation of theology and spirituality is their mutual impoverishment.[95] We can argue that the use of the epigram will preserve ancestral theology not so much as an abstract and theoretical reflection but as a theology that is based on ritual practices that generate belief and a sense of belonging in the participants and whose true significance is grounded on the cultural practices of the ordinary people.

[95] See Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 109.

9.3.4 Mababu theology

In the light of the issues that I have analyzed above as the foundations of ancestor theology, I wish to propose an eclectic conceptual approach that ancestor theology does not hold rigidly to an existing single paradigm or set of theological assumptions. For lack of a better name I will call it *Mababu theology*.[96]

Mababu theology may be formed by drawing upon the multiple theological, cultural, ethical and moral, sociological, and theological foundations that I have analyzed above in order to gain complementary insights into the contextual issues that affect the African peoples. The methodology is inspired directly, especially by two theologians: (1) by David Tracy in his application of analogical imagination to provide a creative way of constructing a systematic theology of saints.[97] (2) by Nyamiti in his application of synthetic method as a basis of his African theology whereby he considered the most comprehensive African theology as "that which serves as a melting-pot of as many true theologies as possible."[98]

The methodology of *Mababu theology* is in two phases. In the first phase, it begins with an articulation of a semiotics of culture, an analysis of living with ancestors especially from the time of the funeral rites. It then considers the particular deceased as an extraordinary epiphany of religious truth that has acquired a new and more powerful form of existence, with pertinence and depth that speaks to the descendants while being present in their physical lives and at the same time being capable of mediating for them in the courts of God. The deceased becomes a

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[96] *Mababu* (pronounced ma/ba/boo) is derived from the singular *babu* which is a Swahili word for grandfather or an elder in most of Bantu cultures. Babu is popular in social and literary communications. *Mababu* is usually applied to refer to "ancestors," so S. Sunguru for example has published a study, *Mzimu wa Mababu zetu* (*The Spirit of Our Ancestors*) (Dar es Salaam: Nyota na Mkuki Publishers, 2011). The rationale behind this title is simple: it is only natural to expect an indigenous African theology to have an indigenous name for its title.

[97] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

[98] Vähäkangas, *In search of Foundations for African Catholicism*, 146.

paradigmatic figure whose life "embodies one or more central values of faith in a strikingly concrete form."[99]

In the second phase, we consider the foundations of *Mababu Theology* that I have analyzed in the previous section, namely the cultural foundation, ethical and moral foundations, sociological foundations, and theological foundations. These foundations are a skeletal outline of the possible direction the theology could take. Additional areas could include missiological issues, issues of Christian identity, language and gender issues and so on. The foundations are considered alongside the mystical bonds that unite the living and the dead, as well as the ritual acts that characterize the link between the living and the deceased. The ritual behaviors become the *lex orandi* and the *modus operandi* of an integrated African spirituality. The proper performance of the rituals enriches and empowers the African's sacramental religious mind that operates by analogy (in contrast with western linear logic) and is more apt to perceive death and its mystery as a privileged occasion for encounter with the divine mystery. Communication takes place by employing the appropriate communicational devices that are familiar to both culture people,[100] keeping in mind that "not only is it a matter of how meaning is organized in a culture, but also how it is [to be] communicated."[101] Here proverbs, story-telling, and other standard pedagogical techniques which are most commonly used and preferred by Africans form the basis of bringing faith and spirituality to the level of intelligible expression.

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[99] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York; London: Continuum, 2003), 313.

[100] Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979; reprint, 2000), 161.

[101] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 31

The uniqueness and strength of *Mababu Theology* lies in its potential to bring together several strands of Christological and Trinitarian[102] ancestral theologies that have been proposed but are yet to find lasting homes in the hearts and minds of ordinary Africans. First of all, it implies remembering our immediate departed family members. Remembering, as James Fentress and Chris Wickham have rightly pointed out, is more about the living than the dead. Fentress and Wickham say that

> When we remember, we represent ourselves to ourselves and to those around us. To the extent that our 'nature'—that which we truly are—can be revealed in articulation, we are what we remember . . . A study of the way we remember—the way we represent ourselves in our memories, the way we represent our personal and individual identities through our memories, the way we order and structure our ideas in our memories, and the way we transmit these memories to others—is the study of the way we are.[103]

Both individual and collective memory are legitimate and practical means by which the living remember the dead and maintain the mystical bonds that actualize a living and loving communion between them. The fitting models for remembering have been proposed by Johnson in the context of the *communio sanctorum*. The dead are patrons and companions to the living.[104] When the dead are considered as patrons and companions, it is because the living seek fullness of life, to be more disposed to the vital force of life. The force is recognized in the person of

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[102] Nyamiti has developed the theoretical basis for the Trinitarian ancestral relations. He has considered some cultural elements including kinship, the superhuman sacred status, the mediating role, exemplarity, and the right to sacred communication, which he asserts defines an analogous relationship in the triune God. For Nyamiti these characteristics offer a good parallel between basic structures of the human person and the inner life of God. See Nyamiti, "The Trinity: An African Ancestral Perspective," *Theology Digest* 45 (1998): 21-26.

[103] James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 7.

[104] See Johnson, *Truly our Sister*, 315-8. Although Johnson has proposed the models in the context of *communio sanctorum* the models are fitting for *Mababu theology* because of the similar pervasive religious sensibilities which inclines both the African and the Christian to the divine and natural in daily living.

Jesus in whom there is the fullness of life (Jn 10:10). It becomes clearer that the emphasis of *Mababu Theology* is on "living in Christ, our relationship with the dead."[105]

9.3.5 Jesus Christ: the meeting point for the African cult of ancestors and *communio sanctorum*

The meeting point must be found in Jesus Christ in whose name Africans are baptized, and for whose sake the martyrs, the first saints, gave their lives. Here is the point at which the various Christological formulations that paint the face of an African Christ, especially highlighting his ancestorhood, bear practical relevance so that as Raimundo Pannikar has pointed out, Christ belongs to the African as much as he belongs to any other culture.[106]

It follows that a sharp theological awareness must continually lead the search for the face of Jesus who fulfills the aspirations of the African believers. A warning has been sounded by Taylor, a warning that merits our attention:

> Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?[107]

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[105] Éla, *My Faith in Christ*, 18.

[106] Raimundo Panikkar has a striking originality in his "cosmotheandric" intuition that deserves our attention. It breaks open traditional categories to get to the mystical core of Christian life. He expresses this insight within a religious context in which he considers what is divine, what is human, and what is earthly as three irreducible dimensions which constitute what is real, essentially related and together constituting the whole. This is perfectly in agreement with the African spiritual sensibility. However, his theological insights become problematic with his suggestion for a universal Christ that is a fulfilment for India as much as of Israel. He suggests that Christianity must enter into the subjectivity of other religious traditions and dialogue with these traditions in order to discover a "Christ" who does not belong to Christianity alone but to God. The reason for this, he says, is because Jesus is simply one of the names for the cosmotheandric principle which has found a *sui generis* epiphany in Jesus. See his *Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981), 54,75-96. See also Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York: HarperSanFransico, 1989), 516.

[107] Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion*, 16.

The African's deepest questions, as Mbiti has insightfully suggested, have to do with how Christ can be seen to be victor against the forces of the devil, spirits, sickness, hatred, fear, and death itself. Such questions bring the African to Christ and, as Pope John Paul II suggests in his message to the African bishops in his 1980 visit to Zaïre brings Christ to the center of African life:

> There is no question of adulterating the word of God or emptying the Cross of Christ of its power (c.f. 1 Cor 1:17) but rather of bringing Christ to the very center of African life and lifting up all African life to Christ. Thus not only is Christianity relevant to Africa, but Christ in the members of his body, is himself African.[108]

A deeper reflection and appreciation of the presence and power of the ancestors therefore will lead the African believer to Christ, and not primarily to a canonized saint. Some scholars have pointed this out; for example, Gwembe writes that

> A more profound study of the ancestors would not bring us to a better understanding of the communion of saints but to a better understanding of the person of Jesus Christ; it would not lead us to a "Saintology," but to a "Christology" in an African form.[109]

When Christ is considered as the common ground for the encounter between the tradition of the Christian Saints and the African ancestors, the traditional beliefs and practices of each dialogue partner do not take the first priority but rather Jesus takes the center stage. Neither do the ancestors or Saints become the focus. Taylor asserts that the focus of attention must be on Christ and nudges the two main Christian traditions in Africa, the

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[108] John Paul II, *Address the Bishops of Zaire*, May 17, 1980, cited in Francis E. George, *Inculturation and Ecclesial Communion: Culture and Church in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1990), 112-113.

[109] E. Gwembe, "Ancestors in African Culture" in *The Church and Culture: Conference Papers*, eds. M. B. Makobane et. al. (Lumko, Germiston: Mazenod Institute, 1995), 30.

Protestants and Roman Catholics, to present *communio sanctorum* in African terms. He writes:

> When the gaze of the living and the dead are focused on Christ Himself they have less compulsive need for one another. But need is not the only basis of relationship; and Christ as the second Adam enhances rather than diminishes the intercourses of the whole community from which He can never be separated. Is it not time for the Church to learn to give the Communion of Saints the centrality which the soul of Africa craves? Neither the inhabited silence of the Protestants nor the too presumptuous schema of Rome allows African Christians to live with their dead in the way in which they feel to be true to man's nature.[110]

When Christ becomes the focus of religious interiority and the communities become thoroughly Christian in their approach to living *communio sanctorum*, it will be logical to consider the give-and-take that is implied in the process of inculturation to mean that African Christianity can make a theological contribution to the universal church. In fact we can ask with Fasholé-Luke: "Is it at this point that the African churches can make a significant contribution to an aspect of Christian theology which has often been neglected in past by many theologians?"[111]

Conclusion of part three

In this section of the study I have examined the possibility of considering the cult of ancestors as a preamble to *communio sanctorum*. Furthermore, due to the similarities between the two spiritual institutions, I found out that the cult of African ancestors does not contradict *communio sanctorum*, but rather complements it. Because of their religious antecedent, African Christians are in a good position to live graced lives with the dead, with the saints in Jesus by combining both the cult of ancestors and *communio sanctorum*.

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[110] John V. Taylor, 106.
[111] Fasholé-Luke, "Ancestor Veneration and Communion of Saints," 210.

The highlight of the present chapter is the discovery that what is usually known as "African Theology" still needs to be developed so that African Christians may have a living experience of God in their lives in depth and according to their genius. Alongside that discovery was a key section of the chapter in which I proposed "*Mababu Theology*" as a way forward for the development of ancestral theology in Africa.

A constant problem in missiology and theology of inculturation in Africa is to adapt expressions of the faith to the religious and cultural attitudes of new and old Christians without compromising the essence of the gospel or stifling or hindering the development of African cultures. For centuries, western Christianity and scholarship have misunderstood the cult of African ancestors and portrayed them as idolatrous and implicitly demonic practices. Becoming a Christian often meant giving up certain traditional beliefs, both good and those deemed to be inappropriate by the emissaries of Christianity. Today however, scholars are taking a more nuanced view, and proposals for dialogue with non-Christian religions include syncretism and hybridity in order to manage the differing but complementary cultural aspects of Christian traditions and local cultures.

I have ended the chapter with Fashole-Luke's question as to whether the time is right for the African churches to make a theological contribution to the universal Church. I have proposed *Mababu Theology* because I strongly believe it is a valid way of typifying African theology of ancestors which makes sense of Africa's contribution to theological thinking. In the next chapter, I will present a synthetic picture of a Luo Christian who is at home both in his Luo funerary cultural heritage and in his Christian faith by relating the developing the theological principles that have emerged in *Mababu Theology*.

PART FOUR

SYNTHESIS: TOWARDS AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF ANCESTORS

Introduction

The late Kenyan Anglican Bishop John Henry Okullu was an outspoken critic of the Kenyan government and was also at the forefront in championing human rights and the growth of the Church in Africa. He outlined an approach for an African Christian theology as follows:

> When we are looking for African theology we should go first to the fields, to the village church, to Christian homes to listen to the spontaneously uttered prayers before people go to bed. We should go to the schools, to the frontiers where traditional religions meet with Christianity. We must listen to the throbbing drumbeats and the clapping of hands accompanying the impromptu singing in the independent churches . . . Everywhere in Africa things are happening. Christians are talking, singing, preaching, writing, arguing, praying, discussing. Can it be all this is an empty show? It is impossible. This then is African theology.[1]

These are profound and practical insights of a down-to-earth African theologian with vast pastoral and spiritual experience. In Okullu's words we see how the African can theologize from a practical perspective. This present study was largely inspired by Okullu's theological insights and methodological approach.

In proposing a Christian theology of African ancestors as similar to *communio sanctorum*, I began listening to the Luo cultural practices in the fields, villages, churches, and schools (as Okullu suggests) in order to obtain the necessary ethnographic data (see 2.0 of this study) upon which theological analysis of ancestral beliefs can be based (see 3.0) and placed side by side with *communio sanctorum* (see 1.0).

[1] Henry Okulu, *Church and Politics in East Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1974), 54.

In this fourth and final part of the study, I will present a synthesis of the foregoing research and analysis. I will integrate components of the information from the first three parts of this study and organize that information in such a way that it can give an overview of the entire study as well as point to the logical conclusions of my observations and analyses. Specifically, by relating the findings of Parts II and III to the theological principles elucidated in Part I, I will present a complete picture of a Luo Christian who is at home both in his Luo funerary cultural heritage and in his Christian faith. I hope that this will guarantee an understanding of the secure place for the Luo ancestors in the Christian faith which will enable the Luo to participate meaningfully in the salvific work of Jesus Christ.

This final part will be divided into three chapters. In the first chapter I will examine the identity of a Luo Christian. It is critical to look at the Luo Christian identity not only because we need to know how the Luo integrates the various beliefs of ancestor veneration and *communio sanctorum*, but also because the whole impact of globalization and Western experience of colonialism and early Christian missionary encounter with Africa needs to become part of African contextual theology. In the second chapter I will make some suggestions on how the African religious viewpoint forms a vital component of African culture as a symbolic and operating value system which I have referred to as Mababu theology. In the third chapter I will make some concrete proposals as to how the veneration of African ancestors can be presented to the Church world wide within the dynamics of mutuality and reciprocity entailed in inculturation.

CHAPTER TEN

10.0 THE INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL IDENTITY OF A LUO CHRISTIAN[1]

10.1 The Luo in the 21st century

Before all else, it is important for us to appreciate the fact that all religions and religious systems change as they adapt to historical events and social circumstances in which they find themselves. The Luo culture and its religious system, like other religious traditions, encompass both continuity with the past and innovation that results from efforts to adapt to historical events and social circumstances.

After decades of living away from their original location in Bahr el Ghazal, the Southern Luo ethnic group of the 21st century can no longer speak as if it has retained its original cultural features. Especially through the processes of acculturation and globalization, the Luo as a social group has evolved to become a heterogeneous group with a wide diversity in terms of language, culture, religion, and national backgrounds.[2]

The Luo contact with other social groups led to changes in their values, attitudes, beliefs and identity. In the present time we can speak of the Luo as having been influenced by modern conditions and whose cultural and religious systems have been adulterated.

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[1] Although I refer to a Luo Christian in this part of the study as I have done in the previous parts, I do so to provide myself with a concrete platform on which I can analyze certain important truths about Africa and certain aspects of African culture. Moreover I pay attention to the problem of particularism and static relativism of traditional social anthropology which Shorter points out has been reinforced in recent years by the ethnicity of African scholars. My use of Luo in this part therefore will encompass and include other cultures within sub-Saharan Africa. See Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 40.

[2] I consider the Luo "acculturation" as described by R. Redfield, R. Linton, and M. J. Herskovits who define acculturation as "the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other." See their study: "Memorandum for the study of acculturation," *American Anthropologist* 38 (1936): 149-152. I will explain "globalization" in the following.

This part of the study is focused on the identity of the individual Luo in relation to the changes that have occurred as a result of the Luo cultural and religious encounter with Christianity. In order to accurately study that identity, we must understand the essential interconnectedness of the Luo, not only with the larger group of African peoples that I described above, the Bantu, but also as encompassing a broader geographical, cultural, and religious sphere within which the Luo find themselves today.

10.2 The Luo Christian in a global context

Globalization as a concept has been applied in many different contexts including economic, political, social, military, and cultural contexts.[3] However, there are not many studies that have focused on the impact of globalization on the Africans' attempts to live rich spiritual lives, faithful to both their indigenous traditional worldviews and at the same time acknowledging and incorporating what is good in other religious traditions.

When Geertz writes of religion as a cultural system, he tells us how "religion tunes human actions to an envisaged cosmic order" and enables members of the culture to perceive the

[3] See for example Samir Amin and David Luckin "The Challenge of Globalization," *Review of International Political Economy* 3, no. 2 (Summer, 1996): 216-259; Nkosinathi Sotshangane "What Impact Globalization Has on Cultural Diversity," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 1, no. 4 (Winder, 2002): 214-131; Njeru Wambugu and John Padwick, "Globalization: A Perspective From The African Independent Churches," *Journal of African Instituted Church Theology* 2, no. 1 (September 2006); Raphael Kaplinsky, "Is Globalization All it is Cracked up to Be?" *Review of International Political Economy* 8, no. 1 (Spring, 2001): 45-65. Schreiter's contribution deserves a brief comment. His study, *The New Catholicity*, is a work of intellectual thoroughness and accessibility that encompasses some of the most recent developments in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and religion. It explores the many features of globalization that challenge Christianity as it enters into its third millennium. He examines "the changing concepts of culture and intercultural theology" in which after analyzing some studies of notable scholars in the field, he explains that "globalized" concepts of culture are emerging due to 1) the weakness within the "integrated" concepts of culture and 2) the changing contexts in the world. See *The New Catholicity*, 46-61. Perhaps Schreiter's study could have been more complete and much more helpful had he included a specific local Church to demonstrate how his insights directing us to a vision of new catholicity may be operational in concrete situations of a local Church.

world and identify themselves within a particular worldview.[4] How may a Luo identify and see himself in the world? How do the beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and influences from anthropology and semiotics of Christian tradition and Luo cultural heritage contribute to form a Luo Christian identity?

Many observers have described how globalization has encouraged the proliferation of cultural diversity where ethnic and cultural groups entrench themselves in newer forms of self-definition. The globalization of culture, religion, media, and capital, and the assertion that new cultural and religious identities are producing new and complex ways of life led Schreiter to confidently assert that "globalization is here and is a presence that cannot be escaped."[5] Njeru Wambugu and John Padwick offer a helpful definition of the phenomenon of globalization. They say it is

> the rapidly increasing complex interactions between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals worldwide. Its critical dynamic is the compression of time and space, while it dramatically shills (*sic*) relationships from local to global contexts. Its power and momentum is derived from growing market capitalism and global advances in communications technologies.[6]

This rapid and complex interaction is relevant to this study because it has enormous potential to affect the dynamics of interactions between Christianity and African cultures. Some scholars have discerned a "tension" that exists within the Africans who become Christians and yet cling tenaciously to their traditional religious beliefs and customs. Joel B. Kailing, for example, has

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[4] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 90.

[5] Schreiter, "Contextualization From a World Perspective," *Theological Education: Supplement I* 30 (Autumn, 1993): 67. Schreiter defines globalization as "the extension of the effects of modernity to the entire world and the compression of time and space, all occurring at the same time." See *The New Catholicity*, 8. The "extension" in Schreiter's definition seems to presuppose a subject that is causing the *extension* and fails to lay sufficient stress on the observable vast, interlocking chain of factors such as international integration of markets in goods, labor and capital, increased labor mobility, telecommunication, and cultural homogenization as some of the factors that cause and maintain the continuity of the phenomenon of globalization.

[6] Wambugu and Padwick, "Globalization," 7.

referred to it as the "African Christian problem."[7] In regard to the African cult of ancestors and Christian *communio sanctorum*, the present study has argued that a resolution to this "problem" can be achieved by focusing on the fact that the two traditions are complementary.

The present study has highlighted that in the past, evangelistic efforts generally dismissed African ancestral beliefs that began with funerary traditional practices as heathenism, and often allowed only limited forms of dialogue with African traditionalists. I have pointed out that progress can be made towards a resolution by integrating the African ancestral cult into *communio sanctorum*. Moreover, since many areas in the two traditions are complementary, contextualization efforts can indeed promote an optimistic and vibrant growth of faith. The real challenge in the development of an indigenous Church within the Luo country (and consequently the African continent as a whole) is to establish points of contact between Christian faith and Luo indigenous practices in order to make possible an interaction that is characterized by reciprocal assimilation. The point of contact will ensure that the dialogue between faith and culture continues and represents an intersection between the wider Luo cultural recovery and revitalization, and the faith of Christians who have a Luo heritage. As a Luo Christian moves to reclaim his ethnic identity, questions of compatibility of Luo culture with Christian faith still need to be clarified.

[7] Joel B. Kailing, "A New Solution to the African Christian Problem," *Missiology: An International Review* 22 no. 4, (1994): 489.

10.3 Luo Christian identity

The problem of African Christian identity has always been "at the epicenter of African theology."[8] It appears that during what Bediako calls "the critical time of the heyday of African nationalism" some influential African scholars emphasized Christian identity to the detriment of African identity as a way to come to terms with Christian presence in African life.[9] Thus a group of scholars who gathered at the Accra seminar in 1965 asserted that

> The search must continue for an identity which ensures to all African Christians . . . a satisfying self-consciousness and dignity in social and inter-racial relations. If the definition of this identity has so far been predominantly in nationalistic terms, . . . this must be supplemented by the reflection that a Christian comes from God and goes to God; (his citizenship is in heaven, i.e. his total and final value system extend well beyond those of his own culture). Full realization of the potentialities of genuine Christian culture within the African context will involve both the working out of a clear Christian mind regarding this context and an equally clear African mind concerning Christian values and ideas.[10]

It is worth noting that the Accra meeting determined that the African was, so to speak, complete and satisfied in a Christian identity. The challenge, according to the meeting, was to put on a Christian mind complete with Christian values and ideas. This idea of the African putting away his culture in order to embrace Christianity is a widely known phenomenon as Schreiter succinctly expresses:

> For too long, embracing Christ and his message meant rejection of African cultural values. Africans were taught that their ancient ways were deficient or even evil and had to be set aside if they hoped to become Christians. But it is clear today that that process was too often a process of Europeanization.[11]

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[8] Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 37.
[9] Bediako, *Christianity Western Religion*, 113.
[10] Cited in Bediako, *Christian Western Religion*, 113-4.
[11] Schreiter, "Jesus Christ in Africa Today" in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Schreiter, viii.

Schreiter's assertion leads to certain questions which have not been asked and answered. What constitutes Christian authenticity, fidelity, and identity in Africa? Should an African reject his African indigenous cultural values in order to become a Christian? In the event that an African is made to reject his traditional African values, does he become a (good) Christian because of such rejection or in spite of it? These questions have not always been answered directly and clearly. I will offer my own reflection below on whether an African should consider rejecting his culture, or at least some part of it.

A few years after the meeting, however, other scholars identified the problem of identity as a major factor in the African's holistic and integrated existence and Christianity's continued growth. One of Stinton's sources, for example, analyzed the problem missiologically as follows:

> But it is now plainly understood that the style of mission and approach, that is the missionary practice of uprooting converts from their traditional environment, sometimes tended to create, you could say, an identity crisis in the hearer of the message. Because the presentation was like as if God speaks to this person, and now cuts him off from his initial identity—uproots, if you like.[12]

Andrew Walls, who examined some early literature on African theology, pointed out what many theologians assert:

> No question is more clamant than the African Christian identity crisis. It is not simply an intellectual quest. The massive shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian world which has taken place cannot be separated from the cultural impact of the West in the imperial days. Now the empires are dead and the Western value-setting of the Christian faith largely rejected. Where does this leave the African Christian? Who is he? What is his past? A past is vital for all of us – without it, like the amnesiac man, we cannot know who we are.[13]

Wall's view is a call for the African to become aware of his identity as well as his past. It is a call that implicitly challenges us to assess the process by which Christianity was rooted

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[12] Stinton, *Christ of Africa*, 37-38.
[13] Andrew F. Walls, "Africa and Christian Identity," *Mission Focus* 6, no. 7 (1978): 49.

effectively or not in the African cultures. That challenge, according to Walls, may be traced from the missionary misapprehension and failure to ask the fundamental questions on the meaning of Christ to the African culture. The fulfillment of the Luo's religious aspirations depends to a great extent on his self-concept as he interacts within the Christian and Luo religious traditions.

When a Luo becomes a Christian, there are certain assumptions and presuppositions that are never scrutinized. For example, it is never asked what has happened to his Luo spiritual worldview, including the typical questions he brings to prayer, and the fears, hopes and dreams that influence his capacity for relationship with God and God's creatures.

Yet when we listen to certain questions that critics have raised in the light of research and intellectual inquiry, it becomes absolutely important to scrutinize such questions and analyze their implications for a Luo who embraces Christianity as his way of life. Some scholars take it for granted that when an African becomes a Christian, the African successfully retains an African identity after conversion.

Chigor Chike, for example, analyzes three main areas that characterize African traditional thinking, namely, the central place Africans give to religion, the high regard they give to their community, and Africans' concept of time. He argues that "in spite of the best efforts of the early missionaries, Africans have retained the essence of their pre-Christian worldview in their resultant Christian faith."[14] Chigor's study, however, fails to pay attention to certain pertinent questions that some anthropologists and theologians have raised and that would qualify such a blanket assumption. We wonder: How do we assess the genuineness of a Christian conversion?

[14] Chigoror Chike, "Proudly African, Proudly Christian: The Roots of Christologies in the African Worldview," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 6, no. 2 (2008): 221-240.

What are the marks of Christian identity? What qualities or characteristics distinguish a Luo as a Christian? "Can a non-literate [Luo] peasant become a Christian after hearing the gospel only once?"[15] Furthermore, does simply performing certain sets of rituals in the name of Christianity qualify a Luo to be a Christian? Does Christian spirituality have a "self-implicating character," as Sandra Schneiders argues,[16] that can tie in (or "tether") a Luo to Christianity and its western roots even if that Luo is persuaded to revert to questionable indigenous traditional practices in times of crises?

Byang Kato provides a good basis for a response to these questions. Kato echoes the questions and concerns cited above, namely that for an African, religion lies in the heart of culture:

> Traditionally, for an African, religion is not merely a matter of going to Church or observing a set of principles; it is a way of life that permeates spheres at all levels of living. One seeks material well-being, like healing, as well as spiritual well-being, like forgiveness of sin, within the religious context.[17]

The question of Christian identity for the African is not a new one. It has been raised by Mbiti and Idowu in the context of African Christianity.[18] Andrew Walls has pointed out that the engagement between Mbiti and Idowu over the matter follows the pattern of correspondence that is similar to the one that took place between Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria in the

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[15] Michael L. Yoder, Michael H. Lee, Jonathan Ro, and Robert J. Priest, "Understanding Christian Identity in Terms of Bounded and Centered Set Theory in the Writings of Paul G. Hiebert," *Trinity Journal* 30 (2009): 177.

[16] Sandra Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 17.

[17] Byang H. Kato, *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith* (Jos, Nigeria: Challenge Publications, 1976), 11.

[18] While Idowu argued for a Christian church that is complete with unmistakable cultural features of Nigeria and "not an outreach of colony of Rome, Canterbury, or Westminster Central Hall – or a vested interest of some European or American Missionary Board," Mbiti on the other hand asserted conservatively that the gospel as an eternal gift of God is complete as it is, requiring no additions from a local indigenous culture, although he admits that "Christianity is always a beggar, seeking food, drink, cover, and shelter from the cultures it encounters in its never-ending journeys and wonderings." See Eduardus van der Borght, ed., *Christian identity* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008), 401.

second century.[19] Indeed if Mbiti and Idowu were grappling with essentially the same questions that were raised by these great thinkers of the early Church, then at least from these engagements we can conclude that theological development in the context of the pursuit of Christian identity is as important and open a question in the twenty-first century as it was in the second century.

In order to investigate the Luo Christian identity in a more systematic fashion, it might be good to consider the way in which the New Testament rhetoric shaped and continues to shape the "Christian identity." First of all, a look into the understanding of Christian identity from a modern theologian, Kathryn Tanner, is in order. Tanner offers two arguments. First, she believes that from a socio-anthropological perspective there are no sharp cultural boundaries that define the peculiarities of a Christian or give a Christian group a definite cultural specificity.[20] In terms of social relations and social practices, Tanner argues that Christians weave in and out of particularly Christian and non-Christian social identities.[21] Second, in terms of common or core beliefs and religious practices, Tanner believes there is no single set of practices to which conformity is imposed or behaviors regulated.[22] Tanner calls our attention to the diversity and openness with which Christianity can embrace the cultures it comes into contact with. She concludes that "What unites Christian practices is not, then, agreement about the beliefs and actions that constitute true discipleship, but a shared sense of the importance of figuring it out."[23]

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[19] Andrew Finlay Walls, in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 14. See especially "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture."

[20] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 96-119.

[21] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 120-151.

[22] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 153.

[23] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 155.

Using Tanner's arguments and turning our attention to the Luo, we ask: First, what specific cultural boundaries can define the peculiarities of a Luo Christian or give a Christian group a definite specificity? Second, how can a Luo hold two different belief systems (Luo and Christian) at the same time, as pro-syncretism scholars have suggested, and weave in and out of the two social identities? Third, what common or core beliefs and religious practices can we expect to define a Luo Christian?

Tanner's arguments and theoretical perspectives open for us many possibilities for investigation. Christian spirituality has evolved in the understanding of its engagement and involvement with "the world." The author of the Letter to the Romans warned the new Christians thus: "Do not conform to the world around you, but be transformed by your new way of thinking, so that you find out what is God's will" (Rom 12:2). Following this injunction and the eschatological spirit of the early Church, an intense spiritual asceticism gave birth to monasticism in various places (in the southeast Mediterranean, Egypt, Palestine, Sinai, Syria and Cyprus, Asia Minor and Europe) as the ideal of Christian life. The Eastern monks applied themselves to *xiniteria*, a concept that emphasized that they were strangers, foreigners, pilgrims in the present world, heaven being their native country and final destination.[24] As a feature of Christian identity, *xiniteria* gave birth to a *fuga mundi* attitude which is summarized well, for example, by St. Thomas Aquinas in his letter to Brother John: "Et de factis et verbis saecularium nullatenus te intromittas" (and do not get involved in any way in the deeds and words of worldly people).[25] If this feature of Christian identity is emphasized to a Luo, he becomes estranged from his cultural roots without necessarily becoming engaged with the deepest core of Christianity.

[24] Anton Hilhorst, ed., *The Apostolic Age in Patristic Thought* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003), 415.

[25] Antonin-Dalmace Sertillanges, *La Vie Intellectuelle; Son Esprit, Ses Conditions, Ses Methods* (Paris: Éditions de la Revue Des Jeunes, 1921), trans. M. Ryan, *The Intellectual Life* (Maryland: The Newman Press, 1960), 28.

We must therefore point out the elements at the deepest core of Christianity and therefore the ones most essential in defining the identity of a Luo. First, we need to point out what it is that can set the Luo Christian apart from one who is not.

The *Letter to Diognetus* offers a nuanced model of interaction between the Christian and the local cultures:

> Christians do not differ from other people in where they live, or how they talk, or in their lifestyle. They do not live in private cities, or speak a special language, or follow a peculiar way of life. Their doctrine is not an invention of inquisitive and restless thinkers; they do not champion human assertions as some people do. They live where they happen to live, in Greek or foreign cities, they follow local custom in clothing and food and daily life, yet their citizenship is of a remarkable kind. They live in their own homelands, but as resident foreigners. They share everything as citizens, and put up with everything as foreigners.[26]

The *Letter to Diognetus* goes beyond its immediate import and can serve as a guideline for the contemporary ecclesial experience of the Church for the Luo. It calls our attention to three important points. First, the Luo culture is a plural society with different cultural and ethnic traditions from that of Christianity. Hence there a need for an intertwining to occur between the Church and the local culture in such a way that each is not swallowed up by the other. The Luo Christian exhibits no separationist propensities. The key to understanding the letter cited above is given by Abraham van de Beek in his thoughtful remarks which follow St. Paul: "Being in Christ exceeds all human identities, since we lost our own identity when we were baptized into the Lord. Therefore, in Him there is neither Greek nor Jew, barbarian or Scyth."[27] What is of essence is that the Luo Christian is in Christ. The Luo is not removed from his cultural roots or required to despise or relinquish his traditional practices in order to live in Christ. The question of

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[26] Tim Dowley, ed., *Introduction to the History of Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 67.

[27] Abraham van de Beek, "Every Foreign Land is Their Native Country, and Every Land of Birth is a Land of Strangers," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 1 (2007): 185.

whether some aspects of traditional cultures are compatible or incompatible with Christianity is a separate issue which ought to be handled at a different level.

The more specific and relevant analysis of the Christian's involvement with the "world" and the corresponding identity is presented well in St. Augustine's view:

> So this heavenly city, while living in exile on earth, summons citizens from every nation and collects a society of foreigners who speak every language; it is not concerned for what is different in the customs, laws and institutions by which earthly peace is sought or maintained. The city does not rescind or destroy any of these, but preserves and observes everything, different though it may be in different nations, that tends to one and the same end, that is, earthly peace, and that does not obstruct the religion which teaches worship of one true and highest God.[28]

Even St. Augustine, who understood and enunciated the classic Christian truth about fallen human nature and the pervasiveness of sin, knew that it is only by preserving the local laws, customs and institutions that a Christian can make an authentic apologetic defense of Christianity in order to enable Christianity to become a powerful influence within the local culture.

A deeper analysis of these questions in the context of the present study opens up wider areas of analysis. A question that calls for our immediate attention is: what are the distinguishing marks of a Luo who has genuinely experienced conversion in Christ? Keith Ferdinando asserts cautiously and realistically that "conversion to Christ necessarily involves a measure of discontinuity with the pre-Christian past"[29] This view only partly answers our question. Judith Lieu has suggested that the conversion of a person of a given culture "involves selection out of

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[28] St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London, England; New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2003), ch. 19 and 17. Gillian Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society* (Cambridge, UK: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2004), 1.

[29] Keith Ferdinando, "Christian Identity in the African Context: Reflections on Kwame Bediako's Theology and Identity," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 1 (March 2007): 121.

both similarity and difference, and promotes interchange as well as distancing"[30] of the faith traditions involved. Perhaps a more comprehensive response can be obtained from Pope VI's encyclical *Africa Terrarum*. After the Council, Pope Paul VI affirmed the Church's growing understanding of its own cultural diversity and gave a very positive assessment and encouragement to the Church in Africa with its immense wealth of traditional cultures:

> The Church views with great respect the moral and religious values of the African tradition, not only because of their meaning, but also because she sees them as providential, as the basis of spreading the gospel message and beginning the establishment of the new society in Christ. …The teaching of Jesus Christ and his redemption are, in fact, the complement, the renewal, and the bringing to perfection of all that is good in human tradition. And that is why the African who becomes a Christian does not disown himself, but takes up the age-old values of tradition 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24).[31]

The pontiff recognized the value of African traditions in the development of an African Church. By recognizing the cultural diversity to be found in the African continent, the pontiff made a significant contribution in making a case for cultures as instruments of liberating and reconciling the African people while at the same time remaining a respectable and responsible part of the universal church.[32]

In this age of globalization and post-modernity Lieu has suggested rightly that Christian identity is "contextualized and contingent."[33] What can an ideal identity of a Luo look like, or rather, what should we expect of a Luo identity in the changing contexts of culture and social and religious interactions in a globalized world? "Instead of stressing a lack, it makes the point that

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[30] Judith M. Lieu, "'Impregnable ramparts and wall of iron': Boundary and identity in early 'Judaism' and 'Christianity,' *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002): 311.

[31] *Africa Terrarum*, 7.

[32] John Mary Woliggo points out that if Christianity fails to enter into dialogue with African cultures the former becomes weak and simply seek ways of survival. See John Mary Woliggo et al., *Inculturation: its Meaning and Urgency* (Nairobi: St Paul Publications, 1986), 21.

[33] Lieu, *Christian identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18.

traditional religious values have an inner dynamic which makes them reach out to a further manifestation within Christianity."[34]

Helen Rhee suggests an approach that we may consider as a reasonable and sound basis for analyzing objective characteristics of a Christian identity for the Luo. Rhee describes five identity markers: theological and ecclesiastical, moral and social, and political.[35] However, Rhee's identity markers appear to be general and simplistic. Kathryn Tanner cautions rightly that we cannot sum up what it means to be a Christian in a neat formula.[36] Such summary may not do justice to the unique identity of an African Christian convert. Perhaps we may get a better view of the unique features of the Luo identity when we examine them within the local Church.

10.4 Catholic Christian identity within the local Church

Although some scholars such as Mbiti have looked at the continuity of African traditional religions into Christianity from the perspective of the scriptures, it will be helpful for us to consider the spiritual elements for the same purpose. Fortunately, the nature and characteristics of African traditional religions have been studied by many scholars. Idowu, for example, has highlighted five features that other scholars would agree with. The five features are belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in spirits, belief in ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine.[37] The general agreement is that the African religious worldview is constituted by a human being's relationship with God, the spiritual world of ancestors, and kinship with nature including animals and plants:

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[34] Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 158.

[35] Helen Rhee, "Christian Identity," in *The Encyclopaedia of Christian Civilization*, ed., George Thomas Kurian (Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 476-9.

[36] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 153.

[37] Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 137-202.

> African ontology considers God, spirits, humans, animals, plants and inanimate creation to be one. To break up this unity is to destroy one or more of these modes of existence, and to destroy one is in effect to destroy them all.[38]

These features tell us the African traditional religious features are very compatible with Christianity. Richard McBrien offers a splendid summary of the Christian religious tradition from the point of view of the Catholic Church. McBrien writes of a "particular *configuration* of characteristics within Catholicism that is not duplicated anywhere else in the community of Christian churches."[39] According to McBrien, the *configuration* of characteristics

> is expressed in Catholicism's systematic theology; its body of doctrines; its liturgical life, especially the Eucharist; its variety of spiritualities; its religious congregations and lay apostolates; its official teachings on justice, peace, and human rights; its exercise of collegiality; and to be sure, its Petrine ministry.[40]

Apart from the Luo's role and involvement in the natural life of the society that we have analyzed above, McBrien's apt summary offers further practical clarity of characteristics which we may expect a Luo Christian to subscribe to or become part of in order to belong or to be considered a Roman Catholic adherent. The ultimate distinguishing mark of Christianity, as Hans Küng aptly puts it, is Jesus Christ himself.[41] A Christian religious cultural embodiment for the Luo begins with the person of Jesus Christ manifested in Scripture, sacraments, worship practices, and other important symbols and sacramentals of the Church such as bread and wine, water, light, and so on. The symbols and sacramentals convey particular meanings for the Luo as an individual and for entire communities of faith in their cultural contexts. Most importantly, the symbols and sacramentals interact with the deep structures of the Luo religious worldview and

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[38] Cornel Du Toit, "African Hermeneutics" in *Initiation into Theology: The Rich Variety of Theology and Hermeneutics*, eds. S. Maimela and A. König (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1998), 398.

[39] McBrien, *Catholicism*, 9.

[40] McBrien, *Catholicism*, 9.

[41] Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future* (New York: Contiuum, 1995), 45.

inevitably undergo fresh interpretation and appropriation according to the Luo cultural expectation.

McBrien offers three broad principles that distinguish Catholicism from other religious traditions: sacramentality, mediation, and communion.[42] Although these principles distinguish Catholics from other Christian traditions, they are the same principles that bring Catholicism closer to African religious traditions and to ancestral beliefs. The African Catholic immersed in the Catholic tradition naturally finds a religious environment where he is very much at home with the Church's rituals, mysticism, sacraments, ministry of healing, exorcism, devotional practices, sacrifice, and prayer. The African secures and sustains his everyday interaction with the spiritual and material world by means of ritual practices. I therefore argue that these principles must be emphasized in facilitating the continuity between *communio sanctorum* and the African ancestral cult which are part of the Luo's traditional cultural heritage.

McBrien's tells us in his summary that the Catholic vision sees God in and through all things: other people, communities, movements, events, places, objects, the world at large, the whole cosmos.[43] In the same way, a Luo lives in a world that is mediated by meanings. The sacred and the numinous are experienced in the ordinary life situations. From our semiotic analysis of material culture, it becomes clear that for a Luo, the visible and the tangible world are all actual or potential carriers of the divine presence. Moreover, just as in the Catholic religious vision in general, the relationship of God with the individual Christian is not just mediated but experienced communally by the inner connection between sacramentality, mediation, and communion. Likewise, the Luo religious worldview holds that God's way is mediated in a

[42] McBrien, *Catholicism*, 9.
[43] McBrien, *Catholicism*, 1192-3.

communal way. The two-way relationship (God and the human person) is personal and individual as well as communal.

Unfortunately, as David Kyeyune tells us, Latin Rite missionaries "forcefully replaced African religious symbols with western Christian symbols."[44] Consequently the material reality that was considered as essentially good by the African traditional religious practitioner and recognized by the Christian as "graced nature"[45] that has been redeemed by Jesus Christ, was not considered as part of evangelization for the Luo. Kyeyune tells us that

> Medals, statues, tabernacles, candles, altars, and churches replaced the sacred trees – the *Mugumo* of the Kikuyu and the *isale* of the Chagga and Bahema communities – and the sacred places like Kirinyaga (Mount Kenya) and the beautiful Kit Mikayi (stones of the first wife) of the Luo community."[46]

From the analysis I have provided so far, we can observe that these religious symbols constituted part of the *vital force* that shaped the religious collective consciousness of Luo (and other African communities) that ultimately acted upon the individual consciousness to endow that individual with a religious identity. To these symbols and objects of faith and religion that were deemed inappropriate by the missionaries, Bujo adds a list of rites and traditional customs that the missionaries prohibited:

> Offerings to spirits and ancestors; co-operations in ancestor rituals, dancing and hunting ceremonies; magical or religious rites on the occasion of a birth, or the appearance of a child's teeth, or circumcision, or a girl's puberty, or marriage or

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[44] David Kyeyune, "The Presence of the Triune God in the Church," in *Inculturating the Church in Africa: Theological and Practical Perspectives*, eds. Cecil McGarry and Patrick Ryan (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2001), 166.

[45] A bibliography that provides a background to the study of the relationship between grace and nature is rich. However, some special studies deserve mention here: Carl J. Peter, "The Position of Karl Rahner Regarding the Supernatural: A Comparative Study of Grace and Nature," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society* 20 (1965): 83; Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace," in *Theological Investigations* I (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), 297-318; J. P. Kenny, "Reflections on the Human Nature and the Supernatural," *Theological Studies* 14 (1953): 280-7; John Webster, "Karl Rahner's Theology of Grace," *Theology: What's Happening in Continental Theology* 2 (1983): 9-11.

[46] Kyeyune, "The Presence of the Triune God in the Church," 166.

> illness. Likewise forbidden were traditional rites in honor of ancestors performed before hunting or fishing expedition, and carvings representing the spirits of the dead.[47]

Now we can see clearly that these African sacred rites, symbols, and objects were part of what formed the intense communal religious feeling and gave a sacred sanction to communal celebrations and regulations, enhanced the feeling of solidarity among them, and gave confidence and assurance of each member of the community to their place in the community. All morals, beliefs, myths, and religious feelings are a reflection of the social structure.

At this point we may argue that by cutting off the Luo from his traditional objects and symbols of faith, rites and customs that provided a solid background for a firm belief in God, a religious vacuum was created in the Luo that made him essentially incapable of experiencing God's presence and providence. As Thomas Aquinas' well-known aphorism goes: "Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur" (whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver). It is reasonable to assert that the objects and symbols, rites and customs that constituted African religious experience and heritage served to shape the spiritual receptors of the knowledge and power of God for the Luo and helped the Luo's spiritual sensibilities to be attuned to God. Desmond Tutu articulated this point beautifully as follows:

> African theologians have set about demonstrating that the African religious experience and heritage were not illusory, and that they should have formed the vehicle for conveying the gospel varieties to Africa . . . It was vital for Africa's self-respect that this kind of rehabilitation of his religious heritage should take place. It is the theological counterpart of what has happened in, say, the study of African history. It has helped to give the lie to the supercilious but tacit assumption that religion and history in Africa date from the advent in that continent of the white man. It is reassuring to know that we have had a genuine knowledge of God and that we have had our own ways of communicating with deity, ways which meant we were able to speak authentically as ourselves and not

[47] Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 42.

> as pale imitators of others. It means that we have a great store from which we can fashion new ways of speaking to and about God, and new styles of worship consistent with our new faith.[48]

Tutu is calling our attention to theologians' conviction that African religious rituals and symbols (through which indigenous African lifestyle is expressed) communicate and maintain African religion and spirituality by maintaining cohesion in the culture. Through African rituals and symbols the Africans are connected to richer meanings and spiritual bonds of their community. Moreover, through the rituals and symbols, Africans are able to integrate human and religious values to help strengthen their bonds in and with the society and to affirm their personal identity.

By prohibiting the African way of worship and passing a blanket condemnation on the culture, and as it were, shutting the store from which the African drew in order to speak with God, a certain amount of loss of identity is to be expected since a Luo is at home neither in his own indigenous cultural traditions nor in the newly introduced Christian tradition. As we shall see below, some scholars have argued that cultural deprivation is one of the causes that explains the rise of African Initiated Churches.

This study therefore proposes that by reviving ancestor veneration and ancestral cultural practices that go with it, Luo religiosity will be strengthened due to the increased awareness and evocation of the power and presence of God. Furthermore, by becoming more aware of his ancestral lineage, a Luo's consciousness is built around a definite clan, giving that Luo both a heightened sense of belonging and responsibility.

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[48] Desmond Tutu, "Whither African Theology," in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, 364-9.

10.5 Areas of incompatibility between the cult of ancestors and *communio sanctorum*

In highlighting the importance of carrying out inculturation following proper guidelines, Vatican II directed that

> It is important to carry a thorough investigation of the cultural traditions of the various populations and of the philosophical ideas that underlie them in order to detect elements that are in contradiction with Christian religion and the contribution that can enrich theological reflection (*Gaudium et Spes*, 30).

It is therefore important for us to ensure that the areas of difference between Christianity and African traditional religion are not ignored lest we equate all patterns of religiosity in the interest of religious pluralism.

In proposing African ancestor veneration to provide a theological background that can galvanize the development of African theological growth, I do not imply that ancestor veneration is a panacea to all past ills and a perfect solution to chart the way forward for African theology. I must point out that there are certain areas in which ancestor veneration is incompatible with *communio sanctorum*.

What Okot P'Bitek says about the Acholi (one of the Nilotic people normally found in the northern Uganda and southern Sudan) leads us to focus on the major tenets of ancestral beliefs. Okot sums up the Acholi belief thus:

> There is no heaven to which the departed retire to join some god in celestial splendour, nor a hell to await the sinful. Death is not a gateway to some sort of desirable eternal existence, but a cruel monster which strikes down a member of a family and the lineage.[49]

[49] Okot P'Bitek, "The Concept of Jok Among the Acholi and Lango," *Uganda Journal* 27, no. 1 (1963): 20.

P'Bitek is right in his observation that the African and the Christian do not have the same conception of salvation. However, it would be unreasonable of p'Bitek to close the door for interreligious dialogue due to that perceived incompatibility.

P'Bitek's criticism calls our attention to the question of salvation as understood in the Christian and African religious traditions, which I have referred to above. We can respond to p'Bitek that African scholars do not have a unanimous conception of salvation. As I indicated above, salvation in African traditional religions is considered to be crucial and Christian thought necessarily carries the same weight in other cultures and religions. Salvation in African traditional religions does not relate specifically to the afterlife. African traditional religion is anthropocentric; it is life-affirming. It is a worldly religion that is concerned about protection, restoration, preservation, survival and the continuance of human, societal, and environmental life in this world.

With P'Bitek's pointing to incompatibility between some Acholi religious beliefs and Christianity, it calls our attention to critically assess the concepts and areas in African traditional religion which are incompatible with Christianity. We have already seen some areas which may be at variance with Christian teaching and which therefore must be subjected to a rigorous exercise of inculturation if they are to be respected within the Christian context. Examples may include the funeral rituals such as *tero buru*, the dignity of women in Luo culture, the phenomenon of spirit possession, and the mediating role of the Luo ancestor. Inculturation may imply purifying these rituals and concepts in order that they may be permeated and strengthened by the Gospel values. In turn the Gospel values will be concretized and actualized in African values and rituals.

Taylor quotes Kagame's epigram in which Taylor observes what the Acholi traditionally believed about their ancestors: "The living man is happier than the departed because he is alive. But the departed are more powerful." [50] Kagame reminds us of a very basic fact: the African's expectation and those of a Christian will be necessarily different. Again, catechesis and inculturation will ensure that the Christian message does not remain alien to the African, or that the African fails to accept the risk of being alienated from his culture due to his conversion to Christianity.

10.6 Legio Maria: explicating an indigenous Christian identity

The contribution of Legio as an AIC to the central point of this study can now be pointed out. Examining the growth of Legio opens up a theoretical and religious framework in which we can study the relationship between Christianity and Luo indigenous religion and move that analysis further to look at the question of Luo Christian identity. The religious and spiritual dynamism witnessed in Legio, especially at its beginning, points to the possibility that Legio may demonstrate an inculturated expression of Christian life within the Luo culture.

There has been an increase in the interests in studying AICs. Brigit Meyer has shown how research on AICs has been reconfigured by new approaches to the anthropology of Christianity in Africa.[51] A point of definitional clarity must be made. This study applies Harold Turner's definition of an AIC: "a church which has been founded in Africa, by Africans, and primarily for Africans."[52] African Christians, typically drawn from the margins of society,

[50] Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, 148.

[51] Birgit Meyer, "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 447-474.

[52] Harold W Turner, *Religious Innovation in Africa* (Boston: G K Hall, 1979), 92.

reinterpreted the Christian message, proselytised, governed local congregations, and organised independent churches.

From the 1960s, when AICs became a central research focus for anthropologists, studies recognize AICs not only as research locations but as major sites for more general theoretical reflection and innovation in anthropology.[53] These studies have focused mainly on the doctrines, praxis, and growth of the AICs and placed them under two broad categories. These categories according to John Padwick are (1) the "nationalist churches" and politically motivated churches, which struggled to overturn colonialism through education and sometimes by force in order to help build the kingdom of heaven on earth;[54] and (2) the "spiritual churches" (which include the Zionist Churches in Southern Africa, Roho [Spirit] Churches in West Kenya, Aladura churches in West Africa and others).[55] These churches exemplify what most people expect of African initiated churches. Their members often wear white robes, and believe in gifts and powers of the Spirit and laws of purity and impurity.

In assessing the origins, and subsequently the developments and religious, cultural, and social value of AICs, three theories have been advanced. First is the psycho-motivational model (also referred to as deprivation theory) which explains the origin and development of AICs in terms of cultural responses to situations of crisis that are caused by economic, religious, ethical,

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[53] See especially José Antunes da Silva, "African Independent Churches Origin and Development," *Anthropos* 88, no. 4/6 (1993): 393-402; Johannes Fabian, *Jamaa: A Religious Movement in Katanga* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971); Fabian, "Six Thesis Regarding the Anthropology of African Religious Movements," *Religion* 11 (1981):109-126; Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); B. Jules-Rosette, "The Future of African Theologies—Situating New Religious Movements in an Epistemological Setting," *Social Compass* 41, no. 1 (1994): 46-95; John David Yeadon Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement Among the Yoruba* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

[54] John Padwick, "Focus on African-Instituted Churches and Development in Kenya," *Berkley Center For Peace, and World Affairs: Georgetown University* cited from http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/focus-on-african-instituted-churches-and-development-in-kenya

[55] Padwick, "Focus on African-Instituted Churches and Development in Kenya." See also Njeru Wambugu and John Padwick, "Globalization: A Perspective From The African Independent Churches," *Journal of African Instituted Church Theology* 2, no. 1 (September 2006): 1-16.

or political factors.[56] The second is a "revitalization" theory which, according to Wallace, defines AICs as "deliberate, organized, conscious efforts by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture."[57] Third is the theory of brainwashing and mind-control techniques, which certain religious leaders applied to recruit new members into new churches against the new members' will.[58] Of these theories, "deprivation" and "revitalization" theories seem to apply in the Luo context as the defining factors for Legio. It is because Legio was a reaction to foreign missionary enterprises as well as a response to situations of political and economic oppression. There was also the organized, deliberate and conscious effort by the leaders of Legio to construct a more satisfying culture. Legio therefore can be considered as the result of a positive contextual proclamation rather than as a negative reaction to western missions.[59] Legio was resistant to bureaucratization and the systematization of faith in written texts. It is because western forms of Christianity were regarded by the Luo as superficial and out of touch with many realities of African life, that it was therefore necessary for a new, truly African mission initiative to arise with a powerful message to penetrate the Luo soul.

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[56] See for example C. Glock, "The Role of Deprivation in the Origin and Evolution of Religious Groups," in *Religion and Social Conflict*, eds., R. Lee and M. Marty (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 24-36.

[57] A. F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58, (1956): 265. Wallace's proposal fits another AIC, The Church of Christ in Africa, popularly known in Luo as *Johera* (the people of love) that broke away from the Anglican Church under the leadership of Matthew Ajuoga. Ajuoga was an ordained Anglican priest who decided to start a renewal movement aimed at transforming the Anglican church to be a place that a Luo could identify with culturally and religiously. See Kustenbauder, "Believing in the Black Messiah," 20. See also Pickens, *African Christian God-Talk*, 1-8. Ajuoga's work of renewal was acknowledged by eminent historians Welbourn and Ogot and affirmed by the title of their study: *A Place to Feel at Home*. The study is published in a 71-page volume that provides very valuable organizational and theological insights as well as methodological approaches to studying African Christian independency in Kenya. However, the book does not give a comprehensive assessment of *Johera*, which a serious reader may get in David Berret's *Schism and Renewal in Africa*: *An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968).

[58] Antunes da Silva, "African Independent Churches Origin and Development," 397.

[59] Adrian Hastings, *A History of African Christianity 1950-1975* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 69.

The strength and attraction of Legio may have come from an "original, creative attempt to relate the good news of the gospel in a meaningful and symbolically intelligible way to the innermost needs" of the Luo.[60]

Legio may be considered as an inculturated form of African Christianity. Two reasons may be given for this. First, Legio's unique contribution to Christianity in a broader African context of AICs lies in the rich diversity of living Christian life. It is in the same category of the other AICs which have become dominant and the fastest growing expression of Christianity in the continent of Africa. Second, Legio fits the now familiar "three self" formula for indigenisation (self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating). According to Shenk, AICs were "living laboratories of that which had to come about if the churches in the non-Western world were to take root and survive."[61] Each individual begins to look for a meaningful life, sometimes in the midst of contradictory and overwhelming factors in the new cultural situation. Although some scholars fear that practical syncretism will weaken Christianity even if (our) theology remains orthodox"[62] this present study has proposed syncretism as a creative way of preserving the Luo's cultural and religious identity in the midst of Christianity. Legio indeed is critical in the hermeneutical reconstruction of theology and culture in Africa. Due to its indigenous slant and quest for an African Catholicism, Legio demonstrates what an authentic African Christian expression can embody as a outgrowth of Christian culture.

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[60] ML Daneel, *Quest for Belonging* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1987), 101.

[61] Wilbert Shenk, "The Contribution of the Study of New Religious Movements to Missiology" in *Exploring New Religious Movements*, eds., A. F. Walls and W. Shenk (Elkhart: Mission Focus, 1990), 191.

[62] Tite Tiénou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa* (Lagos, Nigeria; Nairobi, Kenya; Harare Zimbabwe: Africa Christian Press, 1982), 22.

10.7 Syncretistic process as a crucible for new Luo Christian identity

How can we best express the identity of a Luo Christian using the concept of syncretism that I have suggested above? Legio is aptly summarized by Schreiter's conception of syncretism whereby Legio "blends Christian and non-Christian elements, but uses the framework of Christianity for its organizations."[63]

If we take Legio to represent a section of Luo culture that blends its own elements with Christianity, we have a strong basis to view AICs as Schreiter suggests, as "the ultimate outcome of contextualization rather than as some aberration."[64] Furthermore, we can see that Schreiter's question can further clarify another issue:

> If contextualization is about getting to the very heart of the culture, and Christianity is taking its place there, will not the Christianity that emerges look very much like a product of that culture? . . . Are we going to continue giving cultures the equivalent of an artificial heart—an organ that can do the job the culture needs, but one that will still remain for ever foreign?[65]

Schreiter's question calls for practical answers. From the standpoint of the present study, that answer can only be obtained by focusing on the cultural elements that were either ignored or given little attention. Legio has in deed achieved to a large extent an instinctive and automatic contextuality from which the rest of Christianity can learn much. The end point for such a search for us is not another breakaway church such as Legio but rather a Roman Catholic Church that has incorporated the elements for which the Luo naturally strives.

The issue of Luo identity is therefore critical to the understanding of Luo Catholicism. Both Christianity and the advances of globalization continue to create new contexts, values, and

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[63] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 147.
[64] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 145.
[65] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 150.

meanings for the Luo. He must negotiate, navigate, and bridge these contexts, values, and meanings in order to live and belong. Hermann P. Siller's has analyzed this process and written that

> Humans in a situation of extreme alienation and questioning of their own identity try to overcome this productively. When their old cultural and religious patterns fail or are dubious, they have to create a new meaning for their life out of a set of contradictory factors and parts of thought. This must be shaped in such a way that it allows them to act meaningfully again.[66]

Siller's insights seem to apply to the Luo, especially when we consider that a new identity is forged when they belong to and maintain their identities as Christians and as members of the Luo society. Thus their identity is one of one of hybridity and synthesis. Their identity becomes multifaceted and cannot be consigned to a monolithic cultural or religious category. They possess a hybridized identity that is informed by their unique social location. Their new hybridized identity influences the way their faith operates and is practiced and how they perceive and conceptualize reality.

Properly speaking, the Luo identity may be understood to belong to multiple religious traditions. This study has pointed out that the idea of syncretism is a demonstration that African Christians may build new identities to their satisfaction, finding a certain measure of harmony and completeness in their indigenous cultural and religious rituals and those of the Christian religious tradition.

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[66] Hermann Pius Siller, *Suchbewegungen: Synkretismus; Kulturelle Identität und Kirchliches Bekenntnis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991), 193.

10.8 When a Luo belongs to two traditions

When we assert that the Luo belongs both to the Christian tradition and to the Luo cultural tradition we need to clarify how someone can belong to two traditions at the same time.

Martien Brinkman explains that a person who belongs to two traditions can be considered negatively as one who

> does not belong anywhere, that he or she is literally and figuratively marginalized. But it can also be interpreted positively: in that 'in-between' one can make a virtue of necessity. It means being at home in two cultures."[67]

When we integrate Brinkman's insights with Schreiter's discussion of syncretism and dual religious systems, whereby many Christian believers in Africa blend Christian and non-Christian elements,[68] we may come to two conclusions. First, the Luo Christian is (not literally but) figuratively marginalized. Second, Luo Christians are in an in-between, and in this they can potentially make the most out of their liminality. Brinkman concludes that

> Many contemporary Christians in Asia and Africa thus find themselves in an "in-between" situation. They have been raised with a Western Christianity based on nineteenth- and twentieth-century missions. For many, therefore, that form of Christianity is thus actually "true" Christianity. In the meantime, they also (still) carry with them all the religious concepts from their non-Christian parents and grand-parents.[69]

When we consider the identity of a Luo Christian who belongs both to his Luo traditional cultural heritage and to the Christian tradition, what kind of freedom and spontaneity can we expect from him? Furthermore, how can the Luo continue to deepen his understanding of what it means to belong to two traditions?

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[67] Martien E. Brinkman, *The Non-Western Jesus: Jesus as Bodhisattva, Avatara, Guru, Prophet, Ancestor, or Healer?* (London; Oakville CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2009), 247.

[68] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 147.

[69] Brinkman, *The Non-Western Jesus*, 247.

Paul Ricoeur seems to shed meaningful light on these questions. Ricoeur raises questions about personal identity that demand our attention. In his *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur looks into the question of freedom in the midst of "unfreedom." Ricouer carefully and exhaustively traces constructs of self from the grammatical to the ethical. He asserts that selfhood is really comprised of an *ipse* self and *idem* self. *Ipse* is identity understood as selfhood, close to our individuality, that kind of inner inexpressible core that marks us out as what we really are, while *idem* refers to the external identifiers of the self. *Idem*, then, is identity understood as sameness, as a more external possibility of identifying the self as self, despite loss or mutability of the attributions of that self in time. Ricoeur critiques *sameness* and celebrates *otherness* by opposing *idem*- and *ipse*-identity:

> Identity in the sense of *idem* unfolds an entire hierarchy of significations… (in which) permanence in time constitutes the highest order, to which will be opposed that which differs, in the sense of changing or variable… identity in the sense of *ipse* implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality."[70]

Ricoeur further explains how the self freely represents itself in terms of its "who" or towards its "what." His categories of thought can be applied to understand the identity of the Luo who is rooted in two traditions. We come to the conclusion that in the instances of a Luo's self-perception as other (that is, as a Luo *and* a Christian) his inner self becomes an authentic self to the degree that the self is acknowledged as relatively other, not collapsed into pure subjectivity. But Ricoeur's categorizations still leave us room to explore more about the point where the Luo's otherness meets God, a point which Thomas Merton referred to as "*le point vierge*":

> If we are involved only in our surface existence, in externals, and in the trivial concerns of our ego, we are untrue to Him and to ourselves. To reach a true awareness of Him as well as ourselves, we have to renounce our selfish and limited self and enter into a whole new kind of existence, discovering an inner

[70] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2-3.

> center of motivation and love which makes us see ourselves and everything else in an entirely new light . . . [T]he real sense of our own existence, which is normally veiled and distorted by the routine distractions of an alienated life, is now revealed in a central intuition. What was lost and dispersed in the relative meaninglessness and triviality of purposeless behavior (living like a machine, pushed around by impulsions and suggestions from others) is brought together in fully integrated conscious significance.[71]

The point to which Merton refers is the point that becomes a metaphorical apex of existence of the Luo which belongs neither to the Christian cultural tradition nor the Luo culture but rather to God alone. It is the point that must be touched by the grace of Christ, the point that is rescued from realities of life that attenuate the vital force, such as selfishness, witchcraft, laziness, and so on. We keep in mind that a Luo who becomes a Christian is not just joining a social organization such as a club. A Luo who becomes a Christian is born again (Jn 3:18). Christine Bochen reminds us that "to be born again is not to become somebody else, but to become ourselves."[72] It implies that a Luo who has embraced Christianity becomes a Christian and remains who he is: a Luo. Multiple belonging in spiritual life cannot be explained easily without viewing it as a paradox: the African Christian embraces two spiritual traditions. We can borrow Thomas Merton's conception of his own identity as he saw it in his *Sign of Jonah*. Jonah's travelling in the belly of the whale signified to Merton a journey toward his destiny "in the belly of a paradox."[73] Merton later saw Jonah's journey as a metaphor for a Christian a paradox in which the flight from God becomes the journey to God: leaving one's familiar culture for the values of

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[71] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965), 142. References to *le point vierge* occur on pages 131, 151 in connection with French scholar of Islam, Massignon, and 156-158 in connection with the "Fourth and Walnut vision" when he had a sudden mystical realization of his love and belonging to all people and them to him.

[72] Christine Bochem, *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 200), 64.

[73] Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953), 11.

the Kingdom of God leads to an embrace of the world, in which things bear the seeds of their own opposites. He insightfully expressed:

> If I can unite in myself the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing the one division upon the other or absorbing one division into the other . . . We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.[74]

We may not claim to completely conceptualize the identity of the African Christian, which is in essence growing and changing. For such an identity has the markers that we have pointed at above, such as theological, ecclesiastical, moral, ethical, and social. All these markers are defined by the Christian's response to and selective adaptation of evolving values and practices. It has to be an ongoing discovery whereby the Christian comes to know himself better in the light of his cultural and religious traditions, and in his unique circumstances. Self-knowledge is imperative to genuine growth which is what many authors have pointed out. For example, Schreiter expresses this clearly: "an intimate knowledge of human subjectivity, gained through a disciplined examination of one's inner life leads to the knowledge of divinity."[75] As St. Teresa of Avila warned: "we shall never learn to know ourselves except by endeavouring to know God."

As the Luo Christian continues to deepen his understanding of his identity, especially as a growth from deep within him where he meets God, integrating the Christian beliefs and Luo cultural practices becomes an imperative. The urgent task becomes how to merge the Christian faith and its worldview with the Luo traditional cultural belief system in the heart of a Luo as he grows in his faith to find common expressions of shared values between Christianity and his Luo

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[74] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 21.
[75] Schreiter, *Constructing Contextual Theologies*, 85.

cultural heritage. This task will also imply going beyond Bediako's call of "scholarly penetration of African Christianity"[76] to developing and preserving African traditional cultures. I will now turn to that task in the following chapters. I will propose certain theological disciplines which can provide common elements that reinforce the values embedded in the African culture and Christian tradition.

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[76] Bediako asserted that

> Historically, the Christian faith has developed as a religion savante, continually stimulating an intellectual tradition through a process of inward and outward self-definition which it produces in its converts.

Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 55. Bediako noted that the earlier African theologians concentrated on finding a relationship between the primal religion and Christianity. Bediako pointed out that those ought to be viewed as necessary foundations to the understanding of Christianity as it relates to broader issues in the daily life of an African. In the following I will build on Bediako's insights and outline some ways of interpenetration of Christianity and African traditional cultures.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

11.0 MABABU THEOLOGY: DEVELOPING AND PRESERVING AN AFRICAN SPIRITUAL AND THEOLOGICAL WORLDVIEW

11.1 Mababu theology as a means of cultural and theological deconstruction and reconstruction

M. M. Mulemfo has warned that Africans will never experience justice, peace and stability on their continent if they overlook the different contextual realities which have shaped their lives.[1] Can Mababu theology help in articulating the various contextual realities in Africa? I will try to answer this question in this section of the study.

Before any meaningful response can be considered, it is important to pay attention to Schreiter's observation which seems to be particularly true in Africa with regard to contextual initiatives:

> 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.[2]

Scholars have identified the contextual issues in Africa, and placed some stress mainly on the theological areas of inculturation, liberation, and reconstruction. Unfortunately, true to Schreiter's observation, they have not gone "beyond the first couple of steps." Perhaps it is due to the complexity of issues as expressed in the various cultural expressions. Nyamiti has paid attention to this possibility and suggested that

[1] M. M. Mulemfo, "Reconciling Africa: The Way Towards Holistic Healing," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 86, 2 (1998): 265.

[2] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 14.

> African Theology will necessarily include unity and an enriching variety of cultural expressions. This implies that it will involve a plurality of theologies, although it is difficult to foretell whether such plurality will consist of different theological schools corresponding to the same systems of thinking, or different theologies corresponding to different philosophical systems. An absolutely uniform African theology is an undesirable fiction.[3]

First, I have proposed Mababu theology as a theoretical platform through which the various issues that require our attention can be addressed. As in the great historical theologies of East and West, which were drawn from philosophical and cultural systems that were elaborated in their respective times to frame their questions and to provide answers, so today's theologies in Africa are drawn from the issues that arise in Africa.

Secondly, the wider conceptual framework for Mababu theology must be borne in mind. In the second part (2.0 above) I highlighted examples of certain subjugating strategies found in most mission discourses that formed the wider cultural imperialism—the colonial violence that was done to indigenous African cultures. Based on that historical development and the positive need for an authentic contextualization, Mababu theology is an attempt to allow Africans to draw from their cultural beliefs and create a web of interconnections with each other, with their ancestors, and with God.

David J. Hesselgrave asserts that authentic contextualization is always a prophetic activity that arises out of a genuine encounter between the Gospel and God's world, and moves toward the purpose of challenging and changing the situation through rootedness in and

[3] Nyamiti, "African Theology, Its Nature, Problems and Methods," *Gaba Pastoral Paper* no. 19 (1997): 2.

commitment to a given historical moment.[4] This assertion calls our attention to what other scholars have referred to as "deconstruction and reconstruction."[5]

Taking Hesselgrave's methodological approach and the process of theological deconstruction and reconstruction, we can consider Mababu theology as discourse that can challenge and change the African theological context by deconstructing and reconstructing the elements of culture and religion that have been lost or impoverished through the processes of acculturation, colonialism, or globalization.

If Mababu theology can succeed in these ways, then it can make a claim to be an innovative theology, consistent with growth and change in the Church's development, especially since the Second Vatican Council. Certain contextualized theologies emerged in response to the felt needs, especially in the so-called developing world. So far we have identified Mababu theology as contextual theology; that is, a theoretical tool for challenge and change, for deconstruction and reconstruction. It essentially implies an interpretation of theology from an African ancestral point of view—a view that was for generations ignored or misunderstood. Mababu theology seeks not simply to offer information regarding African ancestral traditions.

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[4] David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 135.

[5] Jacques Derrida's "deconstruction" is a form of semiotic analysis and is a helpful theoretical tool for the present study. Derreida's\ conceptual tool is derived from his study *Of Grammatology* in the construction of meaning and values, which we can borrow to look closely into the possible meanings and values for Mababu theology. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967).

John Ryder and Krystyna Wilkoszewska have also argued that in order to expose the equivocal relationships between certain discourses, a critique must question the presuppositions of such discourses in order to reconstruct their conceptual structures. Ryder and Wilkoszewska conclude that in any well-designed deflationary argument, deconstruction and reconstruction must go hand in hand, otherwise "we end up in the stalemate situation in which we can neither use a system of concepts in good faith nor abandon it." John Ryder and Krystyna Wilkoszewska, eds., *Deconstruction and Reconstruction: The Central European Pragmatist Forum*, Vol. 2 (Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2004), 234. I apply these insights in order to reflect on how deconstruction and reconstruction can occur in African theological discourse.

Rather, Mababu theology offers a chance for critical thinking and knowledge from an African-centered standpoint.[6]

11.2 Is Mababu theology comparable to other contextual theologies?

When Nyamiti points out that the two main themes around which African theology revolves as inculturation and liberation,[7] he calls our attention to the contextual issues which preoccupy theology in general and African theology in particular. Such contextual issues have been developed as theologies, six of which include liberation theology, Political theology, Black theology, Feminist theology, Minjung theology, and Post-Colonial theology.[8] Can Mababu theology compare with these theologies? My preliminary response to this question is in the affirmative.

To explain my response, I will highlight three of these contextual theologies: liberation theology, Post-colonial theology, and theology of reconstruction. I will point out how the emphases of these theologies and Mababu theology are congenial; the major areas of concern agree and overlap.

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[6] Maulana Karenga has recommended a similar pedagogical approach as an indispensable aspect of education that can contribute to the enrichment and expansion of discourse and practice of African Studies. See his *Introduction to Black Studies*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 2002), 76.

[7] Nyamiti, "African Christologies Today," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Schreiter, 3. Emmanuel Martey has also pointed out the two themes as the major strands of theology developed in Africa. Martey argues that the dialectical encounter between these two theologies and their potential for convergence offer hope for the development of theology in Africa. Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

[8] Describing these theologies would be too big a task for this study, a source that offers good comprehensive introductory materials is in William A. Dyrness and Veli-matti Kärkkäinen, eds., *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic; Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008).

11.2.1 *Liberation theology*

Liberation theology in Latin America emerged from the need to interpret the teachings of Jesus in terms of liberation from unjust economic, political, or social conditions. The tenets of Liberation theology are classically presented well in Gustavo Gutiérrez's rejection of blind revolutionary activism and his conviction that conversion to the neighbor "means to commit oneself not only generously, but also with an analysis of the situation and a strategy of action."[9]

Likewise, Mababu theology can be presented as a strand of African theology that focuses and emphasizes the role of African ancestors while rejecting an identity that grew out of Western Missionary influence, presence and justification in Africa. The concern here is particularly with the Western theological presuppositions that asserted that African ancestral beliefs and practices were not on par with Christian saints. The point of contact and the area of agreement between Mababu theology and Liberation theology therefore lies in Mababu theology's commitment to empowering African social institutions that encourage the African approach to spirituality and theology, and a continued analysis of how best the African can interact with God, with the world of the spirits, with each other, and with the natural world.

11.2.2 *Post-Colonial theology*

Post-colonial theology's primary goal is to critique hegemonic ideological constructions that make absolutist or totalitarian claims and to provide legitimacy for alternative theological views. That is why I have considered Mababu theology as an analytical tool that can critique the Western hegemonic ideological construction. During the period of colonialism, African social

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[9] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Essential writings* (James B. Nickoloff, ed.,) (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 205. For more descriptive and interpretative on Liberation theology, see Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973) and Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts About the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).

institutions were weakened by the Western subjugating tendencies which I have highlighted in the foregoing pages. Building and preserving stable social institutions requires analytical tools that can shape the future of African cultures. It is a future in which, as Bediako rightly pointed out,

> the broad aim [will] achieve some integration between the African pre-Christian religious experience and African Christian commitment in ways that would ensure the integrity of African Christian identity and selfhood.[10]

11.2.3 *Theology of Reconstruction*

Towards the end of the 1980s, some observers felt that the contextual issues in African theological landscape required new theoretical and empirical paradigms to express them more effectively. Some theologians felt that the liberation and inculturation paradigms within which African theology had been undertaken were no longer adequate frameworks for developing an African theology.[11] Jesse Mugambi, one of the foremost proponents of Reconstruction theology, felt that since both inculturation and liberation responded to a situation of ecclesiastical and colonial bondage and were therefore mainly "reactive," there was the need to "install a proactive theology of reconstruction" as an innovative transcendence of old theological paradigms.[12]

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[10] Bediako, "African Theology" in *The Modern Theologians* ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 426.

[11] Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of Emerging Agenda For Twenty-First Century" in *World Christianity: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Koepping (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 274.

[12] Maluleke, "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies," 347. I consider that theology of Reconstruction can become a developmental trend in African Christianity. However, I disagree with Mugambi's arguments for the appropriateness of Reconstruction theology in Africa. Although in his study Mulekele has criticized Mugambi's claim that "cold war" had no immediate significance for ordinary Africans and that "New World Order" is not truly "new" and "Orderly" for Africans, Maluleke seems to be bashful in his criticism. It must be pointed out that Mugambi's claim that liberation and inculturation paradigms within which African theologies had been undertaken as no longer adequate frameworks for doing African Theology was both presumptuous and naïve on two counts. First, Mugambi needed to provide concrete evidence, perhaps by way of scientific studies to validate his claim. Moreover, he would have to prove that even future studies will validate his claims. Second, Mugambi limited the scope of liberation and inculturation theologies by claiming that the two paradigms were designed to respond to the

Mugambi's call is in line with what Schreiter has listed as the fifth task of liberation theology: reconstruction. Could a theology with a shift of paradigm, from liberation and liberation to reconstruction adequately represent Mababu theology? Let us look for some answers.

11.3 Essential Characteristics of the highlighted contextual theologies

What are the essential characteristics these contextual theologies that are relevant for the purpose of the present study? Seven points can be outlined as follows:

1. They are characterized by critical rethinking and interpretation of the Gospel, tradition, and the magisterium insofar as they were perceived to be de facto allied to discrimination of certain sections of the societies or minority groups on the basis of race, social class, gender, political persuasion, or religion.
2. They are the products of scholars' efforts towards contextualization and dynamic and innovative ways of theologizing which involve careful analysis of Christian doctrines and authority patterns within the tradition of the church. These theologies examine, critique, and negotiate structures of power, dominant systems, and embedded ideologies in order to transform the world of marginalized and powerless peoples, cultures, and identities.
3. The need for transformation of the world of marginalized and powerless people, cultures, and identities implied articulating contextual theologies that were more pastorally sensitive and theologically relevant to these peoples' unique circumstances. Prior to these contextualization efforts, the assumption that had prevailed for decades of Christianity was that the European and North American theological establishment was too easily presumed to be the only articulation of "Christian theology."

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ecclesiastical and colonial bondage. Granted that it were so, there are still ecclesiastical and neo-colonial issues which exist in the post-colonial context and which falsify his logic.

4. These contextualized theologies emerged out of a perception that the so-called "traditional theology" was perhaps supportive of oppression from economic, racial, social, gender, or cultural perspectives and benefited only a certain number of Christian believers while excluding some others.
5. These contextualized theologies considered certain marginalized and powerless peoples' struggles, dreams, and aspirations in a particular place and time and developed a vision of a new society which would empower that group of people, especially their cultures, and identities, and where justice would be realized in its fullest sense.
6. These contextualized theologies moved away from a spirituality that was narrowly focused on the individual's personal salvation—a spirituality which for centuries had characterized the Euro-American perspectives. Contextual theologies operated from a standpoint of spirituality that was broader in scope and took into consideration the interpersonal and social concerns of the targeted groups. Consequently they challenged the stress on spirituality *or* religion as a "private affair" and instead put the stress on the public character of the Gospel.
7. These contextual theologies saw the nature of redemption offered by Jesus and carried out by the Church as a point for consideration of human deliverance, liberation, and humanization.

Mababu theology is distinct from these theologies in that it is a hermeneutical tool for liberation from Western dehumanizing ways and has elements of postcolonial and reconstructionist projects. Because of the nature of contexuality that Mababu theology envisions, it is important to highlight some of the salient points of these three theologies (liberation, postcolonial, and reconstruction) in order to show how they serve as frames of reference for Mababu theology in

regard to their nature and function. In order not to limit Mababu theology to any of these existing theologies, which would impede its distinctiveness and dynamic character, I will briefly discuss how Mababu theology can be harmonized with them.

11.4 Mababu theology and liberation theology

James Cone has raised a rhetorical question that explains the function of theology and that we may build on: "If Christian theology is an explication of the meaning of [the] gospel for our time, must not theology itself have liberation as its starting point or run the risk of being at best idle talk and at worst blasphemy?"[13] Cone's insightful question tells us what liberation theologies can be expected to do.

Cone's insights are echoed very poignantly by the former president of Tanzania, the late Julius Nyerere. Nyerere presented an ecclesiological challenge to the Church along the lines of liberation theology. Nyerere asserted that unless the Church fights the conditions which condemn the African to poverty, humiliation, and degradation it has no reason to exist.[14] But Nyerere did not focus only on the traditional areas of liberation theology; he also considered elements of spirituality which call our attention to newer ways of implementing liberation theology in Africa. Nyerere said, "We say man was created in the image of God. I refuse to imagine a God who is poor, ignorant, superstitious, fearful, oppressed, wretched – which is the lot of the majority of those he created in his own image."[15] Nyerere called our attention to the fact that the way to be "Church" in Africa requires a contextualized theology that looks into the causes of poverty, ignorance, superstition, oppression, and fear, and liberates the African.

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[13] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 51-52.

[14] Bujo and Juvénal Ilunga Muya, eds., *African Theology in the 21st Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, vol. 2 (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006), 244.

[15] Bujo and Muya, *African Theology in the 21st Century*, 244.

Beyond challenging and changing the theological context of Africa, liberation theologies in the so-called developed world of Europe and North America and developing worlds of the southern hemisphere, have certain fundamental similarities. The creative artful combination of contextual theologies is expressed through the rich variety of theologians' emotive rhetoric and rational discourse. Liberation theologies that have been constructed in the past years have begun to do just that. The tasks of these theologies have been identified as resisting, denouncing, critiquing, advocating, and reconstructing new theologies.[16]

In a similar vein, Mababu theology can be classified in the category of the discipline of liberation theologies. It has as its direct object the task of reconstructing a new theological plane on which an African Christian can live, reconciled with his or her ancestral traditions. It is an eclectic mass of miscellaneous traits of ancestral beliefs and practices that aim at incorporating individuals and communities into their African heritage.

As I have described above, if theological discourse and theological praxis takes the Anselmian conception of theology as "faith seeking understanding," then a local theology that is suited for the present times and worth its salt must demonstrate that the "understanding" itself is contextualized. Moreover, if that "understanding" is shaped by local circumstances in the African context, then cultural rootedness of such theology will necessarily rebound on the local community by taking ancestral beliefs and placing them side by side with *communio sanctorum* and encouraging a dialogue that tests, affirms, and challenges the faith of the people on a new theological and spiritual plane.

It moves on to the recognition that the Gospel was preached in the context of colonialism and racism that failed to recognize the value and full potential of African indigenous cultures,

[16] Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 108-110.

particularly where these concern the cult of the ancestors. Moreover, it also recognizes that African societies encounter new dimensions of pluralism, which is a disruptive and destabilizing force in African cultures that simultaneously opens up and narrows down opportunities for cultural and religious interactions.

Such recognition requires us to have a theological tool that can be applied to critique the encounter between African culture and Christianity in the age of cultural and religious pluralism. Mababu theology is one such important tool, part of African liberation theology. As a liberation theology Mababu theology encourages theologizing from a particular perspective that considers ancestral beliefs and practices as theologicaly vital in the religious life of the African peoples and critiques those aspects of Christianity that rob the African of his indigenous worldview. Mababu theology recognizes that "Africans were 'brainwashed' by colonial systems."[17] Mababu theology emphasizes that if Africans fail to venerate their ancestors due to Western demonization of such ancestors, the result is derision of indigenous African cultural practices, or refutation of the whole spectrum of African worldview. Such an attitude will oppress and dehumanize the African and perpetuate unjust structures that keep the African culturally and religiously impoverished. Mababu theology therefore emerges as a theological discourse that puts a heavy emphasis on African ancestors and human solidarity, in the larger framework of relationship with God.

11.5 Mababu theology and postcolonial theology

Schreiter has made an observation which other scholars would agree with. Schreiter observes that

[17] Bujo, *African Theology*, 47.

> colonial patterns of domination have undermined African Christians in two ways: by demeaning their own sense of worth and dignity as Africans, and interposing European cultural values between them and the Gospel message.[18]

Several other scholars seem to reiterate Schreiter's points. Jan T. de Jongh, for example, has called attention to the experience of colonization and oppression with consequences that require our keen attention:

> What is most unfortunate is that through colonisation and oppression, Africans have been robbed of much of their cultural dignity and they have been made to believe that African culture is no longer valuable for the development of Africa.[19]

Post-colonial theologians offer a useful theoretical perspective for Mababu theology. They generally argue that "modernism, Christianity and colonialism were intermingled in a way that put Christianity in service to colonial agenda."[20]

Colonialism and decolonization has been at the center of some scholarly writings in the recent past. Messay Kebede, for example, in his *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* focuses on the liberation of the African mind from the shackles of Eurocentrism as a way out of Africa's underdevelopment.[21] Julius Gathogo has surveyed the nature of missionary and colonial suppression of the African religious discourses of the Kikuyu community of Kenya during 1887-1963.[22] Gathogo describes how the Kikuyu religious discourses were "undermined by the missionary activity that went on concurrently with the expansion of European hegemony in Kikuyuland." Gathogo concludes that the cancellation of certain Kikuyu festivities by the British colonial government who ruled Kenya

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[18] Schreiter, "Jesus Christ in Africa Today," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Schreiter, viii.

[19] Jan T. de Jongh van Arkel, "Teaching Pastoral Care and Counseling in an African Context: A Problem of Contextual Relevancy," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 49 (1995): 190.

[20] M. Steele Ireland, "Postcolonial theology," in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Dyrness and Kärkkäinen, 683.

[21] Messay Kebede, *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2004).

[22] Julius Gathogo, "Missionaries and Colonial Authorities in Kenya: A Review of the Suppression of African Religious Discourses, 1887-1963," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 96, no. 1 (2008): 63.

> denied the [Kikuyu] their birthright of perpetuating their national pride and enjoyment in the peaceful institution which afforded their forebears the most harmonious participation in the social, political, economic and religious organizations of the tribe.[23]

There have been many such studies that call our attention to the damage that was done to African cultures by the European colonizers. However, the connection between colonialism and loss of African identity has not always received sufficient attention, especially in African theological circles.[24] As many authors have pointed out, postcolonial theology might help "unmask Western discursive strategies of domination"[25] and focus theological attention on the elements of African cultures which have been misunderstood or neglected. Moreover, such attention would illustrate how the cultural and historical specificities of the widely heterogeneous African social groups have handled and continue to handle the harsh realities of colonialism.

In the world of literature that makes use of literary devices such as narratives, metaphors, and symbols (and portrayed in novels, short stories, poetry, theater, film, and television) there are many scholars of postcolonial literature who illustrate that there is a lively interest in the area. One such scholar is Tirop Simatei. Simatei refers to one of the most persistent concerns that

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[23] Gathogo, "Missionaries and Colonial Authorities in Kenya," 63.

[24] Edward Andrews has studied the two traditional perspectives that historians have often taken in presenting early Christian missionaries. Andrews writes that

> The first church historians to catalogue missionary history provided hagiographic descriptions of their trials, successes, and sometimes even martyrdom. Missionaries were thus visible saints, exemplars of ideal piety in a sea of persistent savagery. However, by the middle of the twentieth century, an era marked by civil rights movements, anti-colonialism, and growing secularization, missionaries were viewed quite differently. Instead of godly martyrs, historians now described missionaries as arrogant and rapacious imperialists. Christianity became not a saving grace but a monolithic and aggressive force that missionaries imposed upon defiant natives. Indeed, missionaries were now understood as important agents in the ever-expanding nation-state, or "ideological shock troops for colonial invasion whose zealotry blinded them.

Edward Andrews, "Christian Missions and Colonial Empires Reconsidered: A Black Evangelist in West Africa, 1766–1816," *Journal of Church & State* 51, no. 4 (2010): 663.

[25] Lynda Chouiten, "The Other Battle: Postcolonialism and *Ressentiment*," *Journal of Postcolonial Theory and Theology* 2 no. 3, (April 2011): 2. Chouiten offers a useful definition of "postcolonialism" as "'all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day,' but also every discursive attitude in the face of *racial* domination, whether this domination takes the shape of colonisation or not." Her concentration on South Africa appears to render the study less useful to larger geographical regions in Africa which still have to contend with postcolonialism.

feature prominently in Kenyan literary works, namely, "the violence generated by colonial injustice and perpetuated in independent Kenya through unaltered colonial structures and institutions."[26] Simatei's assertion deserves our attention especially since I have highlighted the complex linkages between missionary imperialism and the colonial "violence" that was inflicted on the indigenous peoples in Africa.

In order to point to the most effective ways in which Mababu theology can provide a strategic shift to the deep cultural roots from where ancestral beliefs can emerge, Mababu theology must first of all critique the Christian hegemony that dominated Christendom. Stephen Bevans has shown why such a critique is vitally needed. Bevans writes that

> whether they liked it or not and whether they were aware of it or not, missionaries in the past regarded themselves or were regarded by their governments through various explicit or implicit images. In this case, and throughout the nineteenth century, missionaries were highly regarded or criticized as the religious arm of colonial powers. French and German missionaries flew the French and German flags over their mission compounds, and in these compounds the culture of Europe was taught in European-designed buildings and in European languages. British missionaries saw themselves as carrying the "white man's burden," of bringing civilization (read: British culture and British rule) to all parts of the world. And U.S. American missionaries saw themselves as helping further the "manifest destiny" of the United States, thereby helping spread the gospel of "truth, justice and the American way" to a world they thought sorely needed it After World War II especially, U.S. missionaries saw themselves as extensions of a country that had saved the world, a country which was morally superior to all other countries and could do no wrong.[27]

Bevans' analysis offers keen insights into the latent relationship between the emissaries of Christianity and the local people and by implication between Christianity and a pervasive system

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[26] Tirop Simatei, "Colonial Violence, Postcolonial Violations: Violence, Landscape, and Memory in Kenyan Fiction," *Research in African Literatures* 36, no. 2 (Summer, 2005): 85. There is abundant literature that illustrates the effects of colonialism to the colonized and anti-colonial struggle. Frantz Fanon, for example, has argued that some of the postcolonial effects that the colonized must contend with are a mix of envy and hatred, that results from a deep sense of inferiority, and which wreaks havoc on the black psyche. See his *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).

[27] Bevans, "Seeing Mission Through Images," *Missiology: An International Review* 19, no. 1 (January 1991): 46.

of colonialism which was duplicated in many contexts the world over. He brings a balanced use of historical background and theoretical sophistication that highlights Western cultural hegemony. Bevans' is an appropriate approach that if adopted could unravel the intolerance that was Christianity's hallmark and which might have contributed to the promotion of Western imperialistic tendencies.[28] Our overarching concern is to recognize the immeasurable disruption that the Western imperialistic tendencies caused to local cultures, particularly the erasure of ancestral belief systems that enabled Africans to live with their ancestors. Mario Aguilar echoes this perspective by pointing out that

> Oral African histories and any African past were overruled by European social mores and their primacy, while Christian attitudes conflicted enormously with localized African customs and beliefs about the world and the action of God in the world. The colonization of African minds was at the center of the educational system and with few exceptions newly converted African Christians were expected to think differently than other Africans and to behave in different cultural ways.[29]

Aguilar emphasizes the manner in which the European social mores interfered with African local customs and beliefs as well as their theological worldviews. Aguilar shifts the focus of his criticism on colonialism to its more subtle and lasting manifestations: the colonization of the African mind. Radcliffe-Brown spells it out even more succinctly:

> The effect of the impact of European culture, including the teaching of the Christian missionaries, is to weaken in some individuals the sentiments that attach them to their lineage. The disintegration of the social structure and the decay of the ancestral cult proceed together.[30]

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[28] Besides the cultural superiority that was shown by early Christian missionaries to Africa, we may take note of several scholarly works that highlight the connection between Christianity and colonialism. Melvin E. Page and Penny M. Sonnenburg, for example, assert that "Of all religions, Christianity has been most associated with colonialism because several of its forms (Catholicism and Protestantism) were the religions of the European powers engaged in colonial enterprise on a global scale." See their *Colonialism: An international, Social, Cultural, and Political Encyclopaedia*, Volume 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 496.

[29] Mario I. Aguilar, Postcolonial African Theology in Kabasele Lumbala," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 337.

[30] Radcliffe-Brown, "Religion in Society," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 75 (1945): 38.

This is an epistemic violence that requires scholars to identify and devise strategies for effectively combating the problems born of the colonial encounter, or products of colonialism with a view of eradicating the attitudes and assumptions developed over time within the framework of colonialism such as persistent colonial violence, derogatory appellations ascribed to African religion, the petty prejudice, or the ingrained racism generally directed towards Africans or African cultures. Frantz Fanon reminds us that

> every colonised people . . . in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation; that is with culture of the mother country. The colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards.[31]

Colonization diverted the attention of the local people from their cultures that preserved their customs and traditions. The customs and traditions embodied their effective means of living and methods of survival in their natural and social environments.

Lieven Boeve has studied the transformation of post-secular Europe and observed that Christianity was not transformed or replaced by a single secular culture, "but a plurality of life views and religions have moved in to occupy the vacant space it left behind as result of its diminishing impact."[32] The same phenomenon seems to apply to Africa, especially in regard to some of the most important and vital aspects of life such as the rituals surrounding birth and death. We may say that Christianity did not replace the African traditional life but rather transformed the religious environment with a plurality of worldviews and religions. Theologians must recognize that a Western epistemology when uncritically applied in the African cosmology naturally tends to stifle African traditions and customs and places Western theology as the

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[31] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 18.

[32] Lieven Boeve, "Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe," *Irish Theological Quaterly* 70 (2005): 107.

epistemic model and pattern of theologizing. The theologians must therefore offer a corrective that empowers the Africans' language and behavior as well as providing them with the appropriate cognitive structures to identify, conceptualize, and judge for themselves the importance of their religious and cultural values.

This present study attempts to show that the veneration of African ancestors represents the Africans' religious, ethical and institutional values. Therefore Mababu theology is proposed in this study as first and foremost an interpretative tool for protest against the colonial oppression and domination that encouraged Western ways over African ways in order to ensure Africans' cultural integration as well as increase the Africans' capacity for the social control of their future. Mababu theology brings the relevant issues to the fore in order to trace the conceptual basis for missionary misinterpretations of the African ancestral cultural practices which to a large extent preserved African traditional religions. This cultural knowledge and the practices of ancestor veneration become a source of authority and an effective vehicle for decolonizing the African mind. This theology operates in conjunction with other African beliefs to support the African's cognitive structures which are capable, by a variety of means, to transmit an African epistemic cultural authority. It must protest and appeal to all responsible authorities about any perceived overt or covert forms of neo-colonialism or discrimination. But the appeal and protest must first begin with the individual African who must achieve mental liberation in order to be confident and comfortable in his cultural traditions and indigenous practices. Mental liberation must begin with the African's language since

> language influences the way in which we perceive reality, evaluate it and conduct ourselves with respect to it. Speakers of different languages and cultures see the universe differently, evaluate it differently, and behave towards its reality differently. Language controls thought and action and speakers of different

> languages do not have the same worldview or perceive the same reality unless they have a similar culture or background.[33]

Mental liberation must also be seen, as Alamin Mazrui has rightly pointed out, in terms of "a deterministic relationship between language, culture and cognition [because] to overcome a particular perception of reality one has first to escape from the prison-house of its corresponding language."[34] If African traditional beliefs and practices were misunderstood or ignored due to the meeting between Western and Euro-Christian traditions, the way to regain what was lost in the African culture is to look critically into language, culture, and cognition to propel the African into the plane of liberation and transformation. The consequences of such a call have been articulated well by Kä Mana:

> A call for liberation and for the transformation of the structures of our allegiance to the West is not enough. We must undertake a process of reconditioning of our inner life: conscience, heart, imagination and spirit. Such a process is not possible just by the power of denunciation and uprising, but by undergoing complex metabolisms whereby our sensibility, which is above all a work of reflexive lucidity, gives us the world as a sensible and significant world, not a world that is barren, morbid and frozen in its creative possibilities.[35]

Thus even the designation "Mababu theology" is itself an attempt to determine the semantic association by means of which an African Christian can translate his traditional beliefs and cultural worldview into practices that help him to live his faith in Christ along with his dead kin. Such translation is only possible when a genuine transformation akin to liberation has occurred in the conscience, heart, imagination and spirit of the African as Kä Mana suggests. Ultimately the ease with which Africans will perform their funeral rituals, venerate their ancestors, fulfil

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[33] Peter Mwaura, *Communication Policies in Kenya* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), 27.

[34] Alamin Mazrui, "Language and the Quest for Liberation in Africa: The Legacy of Frantz Fanon," *Third World Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1993): 351.

[35] Valentin Dedji, "The Ethical Redemption of African Imaginaire: Kä Mana's Theology of Reconstruction," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31, no. 3 (Aug., 2001): 260.

their personal identity within society such as taking up ancestral names and continuing ancestral traditions, will largely depend on how mentally liberated they are.

It is important to recognize what has been done in the proper historical perspective. The first intellectual efforts that were critical of the effect of colonialism may be seen in the efforts of the pioneering work of Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantue*, and from a collection of essays by African scholars titled *Des Prêtres Noirs s'Interrogent* (1956).[36] The African scholars' efforts were part of Africa's independence movement, which many hoped would remedy many of Africa's social, economic, and political woes. These African theologians chose to focus more on the recovery of African traditions, African religions, negritude, and inculturation. The strength of this first wave was cultural and religious retrieval. However, as Josiah Young tells us, those efforts did not bear all the fruits anticipated.[37] In the late 1950's and 1960's against the backdrop of newly independent African freed states which emerged from the grip of colonialism, there arose a new awareness for achievement of independence in all its aspects, as we saw in the case of Legio Maria. This phenomenon has intensified the bitterness of Africans against colonialists and opened up avenues for religious and cultural expressions of revolutionary sentiments.[38]

11.6 Mababu theology and theology of reconstruction

Schreiter has wondered how theology can participate in the process of the reconstruction of a society.[39] Schreiter refers to Charles Villa-Villencio as the scholar of

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[36] Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, "Bible Translation and Reconstruction Hermeneutics," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina*, no. 20 (2009): 29.

[37] Josiah U. Young III, *African Theology: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1993). See also Loba-Mkole, "Bible Translation and Reconstruct ion Hermeneutics," 29.

[38] See for example Felix Ekechi, "The Consolidation of Colonial Rule, 1885–1914" and Adebayo Oyebade, "Colonial Political Systems" in *Colonial Africa, 1885–1939*, vol. 3, ed. Toyin Falola (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2002).

[39] Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 111.

"Reconstruction theology." Schreiter seems to pay less attention to the other African proponents of theology of reconstruction, such as Jesse Mugambi of Kenya, Andre Karamaga of Rwanda, and Kä Mana of Cameroon, whose articulation of the Christian theology of reconstruction is crucial to the social and cultural reconstruction of Africa.

Many scholars seem to agree that the inspiration behind the theology of reconstruction was Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika* (reconstruction), which inadvertently led to the demise of the Soviet Union and the Cold War.[40] Although Villa-Villencio wrote first on reconstruction, the Kenyan theologian Jesse Mugambi was already publicizing the theology since the early 1990s. Mugambi explained that

> Theology of Reconstruction is a recent phrase in contemporary African theological vocabulary. Coined in 1990, when Africa entered a new historical period ushered in by the end of three vicious systems of oppression—institutionalized racism, formal colonialism and cold-war tutelage.[41]

Scholars fail to pay attention to the scholarly writings that resulted from a 1962 symposium that was held at Northwestern University. The purpose of the symposium was to survey helpful

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[40] Maluleke, "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies," 347.

[41] Mary N. Getui and E. A. Obeng, "Foreword" in *Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays*, eds. Mary N. Getui and E. A. Obeng (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1999). Mugambi's brief quote requires a little explanation to put it into perspective. He is referring to the developments that followed the demise of apartheid in South Africa whereby the then president of the All Africa Conference of Churches, Desmond Tutu, and the then General Secretary, Jose B. Chipenda, advocated for a shift of paradigm, from liberation to reconstruction. In the subsequent period various African theologians, including Mugambi, were invited in February 1990 to make theological reflections on the changing global patterns following the end of cold war in 1989 and its relevance to Africa and chart the way forward.

Mugambi's statement that the term "reconstruction" was "coined" in 1990 is factually defective and misleading. Gorbachev's *perestroika*, which implied reconstruction of the Soviet political and economic system from 1986, already took the concept away from its engineering context and placed it in the ordinary parlance of rebuilding social structures. In academic circles, the concept was explicitly applied in the early 1900s. One of the pioneering studies in the theology of reconstruction is that of Henry W. Wright. Wright observed how Christianity faced a crisis that was similar to that which confronted the traditional religion of the Greeks in the age of Socrates. That crisis, according to Wright, consisted in the weakening of Christianity's influence in the society and the destruction of its authority by scientific criticism. Wright argued that adequate response to the crisis was a theology of reconstruction which entailed reinterpretation of fundamental Christian doctrines, especially "providence," "atonement," and "sanctification." See his "Basis for Reconstruction in Christian Theology," *The Biblical World* 40, no. 4 (Oct., 1912): 248-253.

techniques to be used for exploring Africa's past. The papers presented at the symposium were collected and published as *Reconstructing African Culture History*.[42]

The general approach that scholars of reconstruction theology take is that of rebuilding all sectors of life in Africa, including religious and cultural institutions, to become an integral part of an African renaissance. A theoretical basis and the usefulness of the theology of reconstruction has been laid by some scholars. Lumbala, for example, argues that

> African ideas related to history and the Christian history of salvation, community and communion, ancestors and kin, sacraments and sacramentals, signs and symbols have challenged the idea of a God who was not present or was not working in Africa before the arrival of colonial officers and missionaries.[43]

One can observe a problem with the basis upon which the call from liberation to reconstruction has been made so far by these scholars. There is an underlying assumption, and perhaps an implicit statement that the causes of Africa's misery lie outside the continent. Thus Mugambi has suggested that African theological articulation must shift its theological emphasis in the "post-Cold war Africa in order to remake Africa after the ruins of the wars against racism, colonial domination and ideological branding."[44] Josiah Murage has made observations along similar lines. Murage has observed that for many years Africa has been suffering from the "wounds of slavery," colonialism, neo-colonialism (cold war), Structural Adjustment Programmes, and an

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[42] Creighton Gabel and Norman R. Bennet, *Reconstructing African Culture History* (Boston, MA: Boston University Press, 1967). It is surprising that a work of great importance such as this is not a household name in the studies that deal with reconstruction of the different facets of Africa. Yet the volume is important in analyzing the critical history of African cultures and further provides a methodological approach to the task of reconstruction of African cultures as process of integrating synchronic ethnography, archaeology, African languages, art, agriculture, and ethnohistorical sources.

[43] Mario I. Aguilar, "Postcolonial African Theology in Kabasele Lumbala," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 304.

[44] Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003), 128. See also Gathogo, "A Survey on African Theology of Reconstruction," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 95, 2 (2007): 124-24.

unjust international economic system.[45] Masiiwa Ragies Gunda is another scholar who argues that a functional reconstruction theology should primarily lead Africans to tackle the evil that they commit against each other so that Africans can stand together as a unified group of people "against foreign elements."[46]

These scholars are articulating the need for reconstruction of Africa against the backdrop of international and exogenous factors: the lingering effects of Western colonialism and imperialism, neo-colonialism, exploitation by avaricious multinational corporations, unjust international economic systems, inadequate flows of foreign aid, and deteriorating terms of trade. However, I must point out that articulating Africa's ills in terms of international politics and economic systems alone cannot bring about wholesome and comprehensive change in Africa. Evidently, these scholars have characteristically paid no attention to Africa's irresponsible and greedy leadership that is characterized by corruption and mismanagement of state and public properties.[47] Moreover, they fail to highlight the connection between the identified exogenous factors and African cultural and religious erosion. Such an omission is especially deleterious when we consider that the lack of mental liberation weakens social institutions. The present

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[45] Josiah K. Murage, "Development and Reconstruction Theologies in Africa," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 95 no. 2 (2007): 153.

[46] Masiiwa Ragies Gunda, "African Theology of Reconstruction: The Painful Realities and Practical Options!" *Exchange* 38 (2009): 84-102. Ganda suggests the prophetic book of Amos over and above Jesus as the real models upon which an effective "liberative reconstruction theology" in Africa today can be built. There is a problem with viewing biblical literature purely as work of art as Ganda seems to be doing in this instance. One necessarily confuses divine revelation and the economy of salvation by failing to recognize the purpose of the prophetic individuals in the Old Testament and their prophetic messages.

[47] An example from Cameroon is in order here. Two of the foremost Cameroonian scholars, Roman Catholic priest, Father Engelbert Mveng and Jean-Marc Éla, have experienced what appears to be the negative end of political establishment. Both priests were in the liberation movement in Cameroon. In 1995, Mveng was found strangled in his home. Following that development Éla sensed danger for his own life and fled to Canada where he lived until his death, December 14, 2008. The two theologians had been vicious critics of the politicians who were responsible for the impoverishment of the Cameroonian people. Mveng for example was sharply aware of the need for mental liberation as a way to tackle poverty in Cameroon. He recognized poverty in Cameroon and by implication in Africa as "the kind of poverty which no longer concerns only exterior or interior goods or possessions but strikes at the very being, essence, and dignity of the human person." See Engelbert Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosini Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 156.

study therefore proposes that a theology of reconstruction which includes efforts to transform Africa's cultural, economic, religious, political, and social institutions can potentially bring about a lasting change in the African continent, especially in Africa's cultural institutions.

To consider the reconstruction paradigm as offering opportunities to connect these institutions, to which Lumbala directs our attention, is to consider immense opportunities. In fact, when Schreiter suggests that the opportunity for the applicability of reconstruction theology is "so rare," we need to take his suggestion as an invitation to look at the various African social institutions in order to widen the scope of our theological analysis and the paradigm of reconstruction. Schreiter asserts that when theology "comes to participate in the reconstruction process," it might bring about a "vision that can serve as a source of imagining a continual renewal of society."[48]

Taking "reconstruction" from its basic meaning as "the action or process of rebuilding after a thing has been destroyed,"[49] Mababu theology begins by arguing that intentional efforts for the reconstruction of African culture so far have attracted very limited attention. Mababu theology therefore takes as its hallmark sensitivity to African culture and rootedness in the ordinary concrete circumstances of the people. It then adopts a comprehensive notion of reconstruction as outlined by Wright, namely that it "must be such as to promise satisfaction to the demand of human volition for a completely organized and all-comprehensive life."[50]

Although Mugambi has identified and described different levels of reconstruction: political, economic, aesthetic, moral, and theological reconstruction, he leaves out cultural

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[48] Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 110-11.
[49] *Webster Dictionary*, sv. "reconstruction."
[50] Wright, "A Basis for Reconstruction in Christian Theology," 250.

reconstruction, which is essential, especially when one considers the need for comprehensive and lasting change in Africa.

We have seen in the foregoing how African culture is intricately connected with its religion. A methodological approach to cultural reconstruction has been shown by scholars, two of whom deserve our attention. First is the Nigerian scholar Chinua Achebe. Achebe's well-known literary work *Things Fall Apart* has been read from a linguistic paradigm and the focus has been more on the anthropological interpretation of its great themes.[51] Yet, the pervasiveness of Igbo spirituality in the book has not been fully discussed, and, therefore, requires more studies. Here I want to highlight one of the strengths on which the novel is based. Achebe shows that the advent of colonialism disturbed the Igbo culture, one that was unobtrusively smooth and that held Igbo people together despite some shortcomings. Achebe seeks to highlight the dynamics of the encounter between the traditional African lifestyle and the Euro-Christian lifestyle that impinge upon the mind of Africans. Achebe's reconstruction agenda is aptly portrayed in his sympathetic depiction of a complex and traditional Igbo community. African indigenous beliefs and practices are presented as coherent social and religious structures that form the institutional fabric of a strong African universe of meanings and values. A moving scene that exemplifies a point of contact between the traditional Igbo life and Western influences in his main character is particularly noteworthy. Achebe captures the inner movement of transition from an antecedent order of life to a new and problematic collective existence in a

[51] Oiechina and Wren have mainly explored the novel's historical and cultural contexts. See Emmanuel Obiechina, "Narrative Proverbs in African Literature," *Research in African Literature* 24, no. 4 (1993): 123-40 and Robert M. Wren, *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continent Press, 1980). Ato Quayson has focussed on the symbolic nature of the novel and fleshed out a variety of subtexts such as cultural, political, historical, and biographical. See Ato Quayson, "Realism, Criticism and the Disguises of Both: A Reading of *Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart* with an Evaluation of Criticism Relating to It," *Research in African Literature* 25, no. 4 (1994): 117-36. Stock has concentrated on the rapport between Achebe's Igboland and Yeats's England. See A. G. Stock "Yeats and Achebe," in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* eds. C. C. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (Washington, D.C.: The Three Continent Press, 1978), 86-91.

globalized situation as they affect his main charater, Okonkwo. Achebe beautifully describes how the arrival of unsympathetic proselytizing European missionaries leads to the cultural clash and destruction of Okonkwo. Achebe writes:

> His life had been ruled by a great passion - to become one of the lords of the clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it. Then everything had been broken. He had been cast out of his clan like a fish on to a dry, sandy beach, panting. Clearly his personal god or chi was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his chi. The saying of the elders was not true - that if a man said yea, his chi also affirmed. Here was a man whose chi said nay despite his own affirmation.[52]

The second example is Jommo Kenyatta in his novel *Facing Mount Kenya*. Kenyatta's methodology is a deft weaving of Malinowskian functionalism with a typical African polemic. Kenyatta has challenged us to consider that

> the African can only advance to a "higher level" if he is free to express himself, to organize economically, politically, and socially, and to take part in the government of his own country. In this way he will be able to develop his creative mind, initiative, and personality, which hitherto have been hindered by the multiplicity of incomprehensible laws and ordinances.[53]

Kenyatta describes the impact of the encounter between Euro-Christian life through the life of a Gikuyu person. He describes how that encounter impacted the Gukuyu kinship, land tenure, economy, education, initiation, sex and marriage, government, traditional religion, and magic. Kenyatta paints a picture of harmony which existed prior to the arrival of the Europeans. The harmony is attributable to kinship and the institutionalized family which was a primary unit around which the life of a Gikuyu person revolved. Building on Kenyatta's work would imply reinterpretation of African cultures, active participation in the national life of the country, and

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[52] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994, first published in 1958), 52.

[53] Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Heinemann, 1979 [Originally published in 1938 by Secker and Warburg, London]), 197-98. Malinowski praised Kenyatta's volume noting that "As a first-hand account of a representative African culture, as an invaluable document in the principles underlying culture contact and change; last, not least, as a personal statement of the new outlook of a progressive African, this work will rank as a pioneering achievement of outstanding merit" (*Facing Mount Kenya*, xiv). Regarding Kenyatta's methodology and the polemical tone of the book, Malinowski chided him noting that Kenyatta has "a little too much in some passages of European bias" (*Facing Mount Kenya*, xi).

encouraging holistic human development. This is why we may consider the relevance of Mababu theology's avowedly reconstructive goal: to recognize that "African anthropocentrism, manifested in 'ancestor-originated' patterns of thought, is central for incarnating Christianity in Africa."[54]

Reconstruction and inculturation may be seen to lead to what some theologians have referred to as the Africanization of Christianity, which consists of

> re-thinking and re-expressing the original Christian message in an African cultural milieu. It [has] the task of confronting the Christian faith and African culture. In the process there is the inter-penetration of both. Christian faith enlightens African culture and the basic data of revelation contained in Scriptures and tradition are critically re-examined for the purpose of giving them African cultural expression. Thus there is integration of faith and culture, and from it is born a new theological reflection that is African and Christian. In this approach therefore, African theology means Christian faith attaining African cultural expression.[55]

11.7 Mababu Theology: Preserving and developing African religious cultures

11.7.1 *Theological reflection*

How can Mababu theology be said to preserve and develop African religions and cultures? The first way that is proposed here is through theological reflection. In *Christian Identity and Theological Education*, Hough and Cobb called our attention to the dichotomy that is often observed in religion and everyday life, referring to it as "pernicious."[56] In various ways, I have highlighted some major scholars' assertions that Africans do not dichotomize between religion and actual life.

With the impact of acculturation and globalization slowly taking its toll on the traditional lives of the African peoples, it is crucial that intentional efforts be put in place to help hold

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[54] Bujo, *African Theology*, 77.

[55] Justin S. Ukpong, *African Theologies Now: A Profile* (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1984), 30.

[56] Joseph C. Hough and John B. Cobb, *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

religion and real life together in the ordinary lives of the Africans. As any student of spirituality knows, authentic religion seen in the fabric of ordinary life is about attaining and sustaining authentic human development.

The German scholar Wilhelm Dilthey is not a household name in current literary circles, at least in Africa, but his methodology deserves our close attention. He has applied a methodology that can be instrumental in the promoting holistic human development. Dilthey emphasized both reason and feeling as important components of a person's inner life. Dilthey proceeded to formulate the concept of *Geisteswissenschaften* which is often translated as "human sciences" but, as Rudolf Makkreel explains, encompasses the humanities and the social sciences in general.[57] In his concept Dilthey highlights the significance of developing a whole human person, particularly the intelligence and the totality of the soul, including the faculties of human willing, feeling, and perceiving. For Dilthey the first requirement for any real and productive critique was "mastery of large masses of knowledge in different fields."[58]

The preservation and development of African religious cultures therefore implies promoting holistic human development which takes place within the context of theological reflection. Robert Kinast describes theological reflection as follows:

> Theological reflection is the discipline of exploring our individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as from those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of both. Theological reflection therefore may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our experience and how we understand the religious tradition. The outcome is new truth and meaning for living.[59]

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[57] Rudolf A. Makkreel, "Wilhelm Dilthey and the Neo-Kantians: The Distinction of the Geisteswissenschaften and the Kulturwissenschaften," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 7, no. 4 (Oct., 1969): 423.

[58] Bonno Tapper, "Dilthey's Methodology of the Geisteswissenschaften," *The Philosophical Review* 34, no. 4 (Jul., 1925): 334.

[59] Robert Kinast, *Let Ministry Teach* (Maderia Beach, FL: Center for Theological Reflection, 1990), 3.

Kinast is calling attention to the fact that theological reflection is not a fleeting spiritual exercise. Rather, it is discipline that, if done properly, entails exploring individual and corporate experiences. It also confirms, challenges, clarifies and expands those experiences within our cultural and religious traditions.

11.7.2 *The drums and other musical instruments*

Alan Parkhurst Merriam was a renowned ethnomusicologist during the last half of the twentieth century and a professor of anthropology. He presented a paper at the symposium of 1962 at the Northwestern University (mentioned above) in which he called attention to the important contribution that music makes in the reconstruction of African culture history.[60] Merriam cited Leo Frobenius, who considered the African drum to be of primary importance by asserting that "our investigation of culture-anatomy may begin with African drum forms."[61]

Both Merriam and Frobenius call our attention to the fact that calls for liberation, reconstruction, and decolonization will not be complete unless there is a parallel concern for intentional preservation of African cultures. Lera Boroditsky reminds us of the various ways in which

> people construe events, reason about causality, keep track of number, understand material substance, perceive and experience emotion, reason about other people's minds, choose to take risks, and even in the way they choose professions and spouses.[62]

Boroditsky's insights reiterate the semiotics of culture that I have described above; namely, values, virtues, and attitudes (*ideational*) expressed in actions that provide a unified sense of

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[60] Alan Parkhurst Merriam, "The Use of Music as a Technique of Reconstructing Culture History in Africa," in *Reconstructing Culture History in Africa*, 83-114.

[61] Leo Frobenius, "The Origin of African Civilizations," *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution* 1 (1898): 640-641.

[62] Cited in Ai Dueci, "Culture, Language, and Integration," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 40, no. 2 (2012): 116.

connection to their history (*performance*), and in language, food, music and dance, and ritual space (*material*). These are the aspects of African cultures that must be preserved to enable African peoples to interact with the world from their unique perspective. Africans see the world from a perspective emphasizing certain African values and virtues that are influenced by their relationship with their ancestors. In that perspective, all things in the universe, the material as well as the spiritual, are related. For African peoples who are close to their indigenous traditions and native values, they think within a native reality consisting of a physical and metaphysical world.

A concrete example that Merriam and Frobenius brought to our attention is in order. Music is one of the unique characteristics of African peoples. One of the means by which a death announcement is passed across African villages is by the sound of drums. To an outsider music is simply music, the sound of drum is just that, but to an African the drum is the sign of life: its beat is the heartbeat of the community.[63] The drum is one of the most commonly used musical instruments. It features very prominently at funeral rituals as I have noted above.

Unfortunately the drums were some of the musical instruments that were misunderstood by the early missionaries to Africa. Georges Niangora-Bouah tells us that

> Christian Missionaries found in the drum an excuse to wage a war against African traditional possession cults. They took away and destroyed thousands of drums, convinced that this membranophone was the diabolic instrument that liberated satanic maleficent forces and energies.[64]

[63] Sebastian Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life* (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications, 1997).

[64] Georges Niangora-Bouah, "The Talking Drum: A Traditional African Instrument of Liturgy and Mediation with the Sacred," in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, 81.

What the missionaries considered as a "diabolic instrument" was and remains in fact one of the most unique African instruments. It is also a symbol that makes African religiosity conceptually different from Western practices in the ways Africans present themselves to God.

Music and body movements are used elaborately in all African celebrations. Edward T. Hall refers to it as cultural grammar that is known only to the people who perform it.[65] Hall writes:

> There is an underlying level of culture that is highly patterned—a set of unspoken, implicit rules of behavior and thought that controls everything we do. This hidden cultural grammar defines the way in which people view the world, determined their values, and establishes the basic tempo and rhythms of life. Most of us are either totally unaware or else only peripherally aware of this. I call these hidden paradigms primary level culture.[66]

Hall's insights find their application especially in many AICs such as the Legio Maria whereby dance explains the trance which the worshippers enter into and is the religious cultural grammar that is best known to Legio. The AICs could be viewed as what an independent African religious spirit can do without the restrictions and controls that become emphasized when, for example, Catholicism is identified with uniformity.[67] African worship, together with the musical instruments, is better understood by Africans who use them because they are a hidden cultural grammar that defines how Africans view the world, determine their values, and establish the basic tempo and rhythms of their lives.

As with the African religious masks I discussed above, African religiosity was often regarded as irrational beliefs in magic, fetishes, and simply as rituals of invoking evil spirits.[68]

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[65] Edward T. Hall, *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimensions of Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 6.

[66] Hall, *The Dance of Life*, 6.

[67] Joan L. Roccasalvo, *The Eastern Catholic Churches: An Introduction to Their Worship and Spirituality* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992), 6.

[68] Choon Sup Bae, *Ancestor Worship and the Challenges It Poses to the Christian Mission and Ministry* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pretoria, South Africa, 2007), 44.

The drum serves in the present work as an example of other instruments which serve similar purposes, such as the slit gongs, rattles, shakers, double bells, as well as types of harps and harp-like instruments such as the Kora. Other types include many kinds of xylophone and lamellophone, such as the *mbira*, and different types of wind instrument like horns, flutes, whistles, and trumpets. These instruments are usually played in the context of togetherness, when families express their unity and wholeness in accompanying joyful occasions, funerary rituals, and other reconciliatory ceremonies that unite the families with their ancestors. The rituals of dances that accompany sharing meals, food and drink, and libations become the necessary cultural impetuses that spur a given community to seek cultural unity and wholeness of the society and that determine the society's body movements.[69]

The symbolic values and aesthetic qualities of drums and other African musical instruments are perhaps not easy to grasp. Perhaps theologians could work towards establishing their significance in the religious realm in order to highlight their spiritual function to dramatize their connection with the ancestors. Drums give the participants a chance for artistic expression of their immediate practical needs in a manner that is rooted in their rich ancestral traditions. The sound of fast-paced rhythmic drums, for example, is usually used to convey an intense quality of life that is both artistic and generative of sacredness. In one of his beautifully described scenes in the Igbo traditional society, Chinua Achebe shows how drums blended naturally with the village life:

> The drums were still beating, persistent and unchanging. Their sound was no longer a separate thing from the living village. It was like the pulse of its heart. It

[69] K. Johnson-Hill, "Inner Exhilaration and Speaking the Truth Through Metaphor: An Exploration of the Theological Significance of *Mafãna* and *Heliaki* in Tongan Dance," *Journal of World Christianity* 14, no. 1, (2008): 19-34.

> throbbed in the air, in the sunshine, and even in the trees, and filled the village with excitement.[70]

This scene presents a very clear example of how Achebe creates natural and typical African environments by the sounds and rhythms of the traditional musical instruments. Here he observes the dynamic framework of the society's social interactions and interpersonal relations by the use of drums. The drums are the effective foundation for the society's collective consciousness and institutional strength. The drums also set a narrative tone that ultimately enforces the larger vision of the society's life that Achebe is presenting. The significance of the drum is well demonstrated: drums manifest vitality inherent in and interwoven with the community's organic mode of existence.

Perhaps we can take cues for interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue from scholars of African native cultures such as Achebe and Kenyatta, who took a critical look at colonization and Christianity and with their knowledge of the convictions and worldviews of the natives, concluded that African theology must continue to wrestle with how Africans can preserve their deepest convictions and worldviews embodied in their cultures. Adrian Hastings has called the attention of the theological community to observe that the "areas of traditional Christian doctrines which are not reflected in the African past disappear or are marginalized."[71] Although Hastings made this observation in reference to the absence of serious discussion on Christology and the need for African Christological formulations, we may apply the observation to the need to preserve African cultural traditions and state it thus: areas of African traditional cultural past that are not reflected in Christian doctrine disappear or are marginalized, as Hastings asserts. The African drums and other musical instruments demonstrate how Africans weave together three

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[70] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 31.
[71] Adrian Hastings, *African Christianity: An Essay in Interpretation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), 50.

very important aspects of their lives: their prayer, belief, and life. As pointed out above in regard to *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*, beliefs in the presence and power of ancestors can awaken in the Africans a sense of awe for God and such faith can influence their way of prayer and consequently their way of living.

The African traditional customs help Africans to remain rooted in their indigenous spirituality and their ritual practices. If form is to remain organically linked to substance, then ritual behavior which preserves the integrity of African theology and spirituality must be organically linked to the spirituality that produced it by way of familiar rituals. We can argue that the use of drums and other musical instruments will preserve African traditional rituals which unite the people with their ancestors and strengthen the people's faith and generate a sense of belonging within their societies. Fortunately, Vatican II mandates us to "recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found" (*Nostra Aetate*, 2) in other cultures. With these words the Council did not only proclaim a new era in the Church's attitude towards other cultural traditions; it also urged Christ's followers, especially its leaders, to identify, protect, and encourage the growth, those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous African cultural traditions which are rooted in Africa's past, transmitted to the present by successive African ancestors mainly through rituals and oral traditions. In Africa's institutionalized beliefs and practices we find African cultural values which are material, spiritual, religious, moral, aesthetic, communal or individualistic. The African traditional values are interlinked with other aspects of Africa's traditional life, for example the religious, cultural, social, and moral principles that African peoples cling to. For this reason, as Ọmọṣade Awolalu summarizes succinctly, African religion is

largely written in the people's myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor worshipped; it is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans, young and old.[72]

[72] J. Ọmọṣade Awolalu, "Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44, no. 2 (Jun., 1976): 275.

CHAPTER TWELVE

12.0 MABABU THEOLOGY: AN AFRICAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

12.1 Can African Christianity offer anything to the Church worldwide?

Tokunboh Adeyemo calls our attention to a myth out there that since the church in Africa is financially poor, there is nothing it can offer to the church worldwide[1]. Is this true? Let us consider some possibilities.

Perhaps the best place to begin looking for a well-articulated answer is in the words of Pope John Paul II in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*. The pontiff pointed out that

> Although Africa is very rich in natural resources, it remains economically poor. At the same time, it is endowed with a wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities which it can offer to the Churches and to humanity as a whole. . . . They are values which can contribute to an effective reversal of the Continent's dramatic situation and facilitate that worldwide revival on which the desired development of individual nations depends (no. 42).

In spite of Africans' "wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities" that the Pope referred to, it seems African scholars have spent a lot of effort trying to provide positive ways through which Africa may be perceived, by moving away from the perception that Africa is always on the receiving end, especially since the Western presence in the continent which systematically began in the 15th century. Shorter, for example**,** has spoken for many scholars when he wrote that

[1] Tokunboh Adeyamo, "African Contribution to Christendom," *Scriptura* 39 (1991): 89-93.

> African Christians remain in the shackles of a 'White Church,' in the grip of forces that are not of their own making. A church has been created in Africa which can only be sustained in a strict bondage—organizational, cultural, and financial—to the White world.[2]

Shorter's reference to "White Church" and the Church in Africa calls our attention to how African Christianity can be viewed within the global context. Prominent African scholars have engaged in critical exploration of the place and relevance of an African Church within a global Christianity. Some studies offer useful statistics on Christianity's changing global distribution that seem to ask Africa to become more aware of its place in the universal Church. In 1900, two-thirds of the world's Christian population resided in Europe; by 2000, less than a quarter did. In that same hundred-year span, the African Christian population mushroomed from 10 million to almost 400 million.[3] These statistics tell us, among other things, that the African Church cannot continue to be only on the receiving end. The expansion of Christianity in various parts of the world can be an opportunity for a greater African contribution.

Lamin Sanneh, a leading authority in world Christianity, asserts that the expansion of Christianity in the non-Western world provides important lessons for the modern secular post-Christendom West. Sanneh argues that Christianity "is now in the twilight of its Western phase . . . Its future as a world religion is now being formed and shaped at the hands and in the minds of its non-Western adherents."[4]

Other scholars have suggested that the Church in Africa can indeed contribute to the world Church. Shorter suggests that the universal Church needs African theology for its sound

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[2] Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 22.

[3] See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 2-3; See also Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xx.

[4] Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations*, xx.

health.[5] Unfortunately Shorter does not describe the African theologies that the Church needs for its health. But he insightfully suggests that such theologies will not destroy or negatively impact the Church's universal tradition but may instead serve as a corrective in two particular ways.

First, "it may awaken themes in universal Christianity which are dormant, or latent."[6] Although Shorter does not specify what those themes are, I suggest that Mababu theology (I refer particularly to its aspects that reflect Africans' devotion to their ancestors and attention to the indigenous practices that maintain the mystical links between the living and the dead) may serve universal Christianity in three particular ways:

1. It is an indigenous African traditional theology that might provide the most congenial ground and creative approach to interpreting *communio sanctorum* especially as expressed in Hebrews (12:1): "with all these witnesses to faith around us like a cloud." Such an interpretation might help ignite discussions and studies which could ultimately produce ritual practices to help Christians live with the saints in the modern world.
2. Africans traditionally believe that they can have mystical contact with their ancestors, which are not simply lineal progenitors but rather several individuals and groups of relatives who have died, through certain rituals and celebrations. Such rituals and celebrations may include, for example, paying respect to their relics, their past abodes, and their representations in such forms as family pictures, or other selected paraphernalia.
3. Given that death is everywhere and always present, and all Christians (like Africans) relate in some way to their dead and often at such times with one another, Mababu theology, as has been suggested by H. K. Yeung, can perform two basic functions:

[5] Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 31.
[6] Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 31.

regulative, that is to help Christians set "new standards and patterns for kinship relationship", and educational, that is, "to remind the young generation to show gratitude" to their elders.[7]

Second, "it may help to show that certain elements presented to Africa as essential in the universal tradition are in fact secondary elements, deriving from the particular Western tradition." Again, Shorter does not spell out those elements but we can follow some perspectives from this present study and argue that such elements can be fleshed out and described very exhaustively within the theoretical analysis of Mababu theology.

For example, systematic theology formulates an orderly, rational, and coherent theology of God and presents God to the African as "Father." But may an African refer to God by a name other than "Father"? Systematic theology draws on the foundational scriptural texts and simultaneously investigates the development of the theology of God as "Father" within the course of Christian history. But before systematic theology can teach the African about God as "Father," it must pause briefly and remember that God as "Father" is a central affirmation of the Judeo-Christian tradition and is applied analogically. Systematic theology must also keep in mind the long apophatic Christian tradition that tells us, God is unknowable.[8] Elizabeth Johnson reminds us that

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[7] H. K. Young, "Ancestors" in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, 31.

[8] Elizabeth Johnson draws our attention to the problems of understanding of God which many scholars have pointed at, particularly feminist theologians. Johnson says that women theologians out of their personal experience of debilitating effects of referring to God as "Father" "envision God exclusively through analogy with the male human being, and do so with a pervasiveness and tenacity which at least raises the question of the success of the first commandment in eliciting obedience. Imagery for the divine throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition is taken predominantly from the roles and relations of men, God being named as lord, king, father, son." Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male And Female," *Theological Studies*, 45 (1984), 442. See also Cherith Nordling, *Knowing God by Name: A Conversation Between Elizabeth Johnson and Karl Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009, 2010), 84.

Other examples of the use of analogy may include Jesus as "son," or "Christ." As analogies they are true, but more untrue than true if taken literally. Rather they must be understood in an "eminent" way. We bear in mind that Church Fathers taught that human reason is unable to discover or even to represent adequately the mysteries of

> In essence, God's unlikeness to the corporal and spiritual finite world is total; hence we simply cannot understand God. No human concept, word, or image, all of which originate in experience of created reality, can circumscribe the divine reality, nor can any human construct express with any measure of adequacy the mystery of God, who is ineffable. This situation is due not to some reluctance on the part of God to self-reveal in a full way, nor to the sinful condition of the human race making reception of such a revelation impossible, nor even to our contemporary mentality of skepticism in religious matters. Rather, it is proper to God as God to transcend all direct similarity to creatures, and thus never to be known comprehensively or essentially as God. This sense of an unfathomable depth of mystery, of a vastness of God's glory too great for the human mind to grasp, undergirds the religious significance of speech about God; such speech never definitively possesses its subject but leads us ever more profoundly into attitudes of awe and adoration.[9]

Systematic theology must pause long enough and perhaps look to features of the African mind or "psyche" to find appropriate African analogies to help illuminate the doctrine of God. Because of Africans' perception of God as immanent and transcendent as well as their spiritual sensibilities for their ancestors, they require a corresponding worldview to understand God better.

Shorter also suggests that African theology will help the Church to open up new avenues for exploration, to develop a new awareness . . . to cease to be a "White Church."[10] Shorter does not give a fully developed treatment of the avenues that African theology will open up for

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faith. The Fathers maintain that it is necessary to use analogical conceptions to represent and express the mysteries of faith. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, after the Pseudo-Dionysius and Albertus Magnus, gives the theory of analogy applied to the mysteries of faith before, in and after revelation. See his *Summa Theologiae 12 1a, 84, 7: Human Intelligence*, tr. Paul Durbin (New York; Eyre-Sptisswood; London: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1967). Moreover, no less than other extra-Biblical images of Christ (for example the Sacred Heart), in the following we shall see how "God" and "Jesus" can be understood within Mababu theology in the light of the core theological truths taught by the Magisterium and as complementary to the images and names of God and of his Christ that are found in revelation.

[9] Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 105.

[10] Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 31.

exploration. However, he explains that the content of Africa's contribution to world Christianity will mainly be in "the realm of the so called 'Secular theology.'"[11]

Shorter analyzes two particular features of African traditional spirituality that place it in a privileged position. First, Shorter sees the African religious outlook that has been integrated with every aspect of individual and social life. Second, Shorter asserts that since African religions focus on the world which is both spiritual and material, African theologians are in a privileged place to "help the world rediscover the relativity of such terms as 'sacred' and 'profane' and encourage the typically African vision of 'wholeness' or integration."[12]

Other scholars seem to concur with Shorter in his view that Africa could share certain spiritual riches with the worldwide Church. Justin Ukpong also believes that

> The sense of God and of the spiritual is still very strong within the culture, even if not as strong as it was many years back. These make African theologies which we have discussed here creation-oriented. They take on a perspective that assumes a basic goodness in creation, in the order of nature, and in the social order. They nurture an integrative view of reality whereby even the profane is seen as capable of being subsumed into the supernatural. All this should be a complementary contribution to Western theology's secularizing and individualistic background.[13]

Two important points emerge from these insights which help us to answer the question whether African Christianity has anything to offer the Church worldwide. First, African religious heritage places a strong accent and consciousness on culture and the power and presence of God in the world. Hence, African Christianity can challenge radical relativism and post-modernity especially in the so-called developed world, and enrich the world and the universal Church by its

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[11] Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 34.
[12] Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 34.
[13] Justin S. Ukpong, Current Theology: The Emergence of African Theologies," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 536.

deep religious sense, an appreciation and reverence for sacredness in nature, and the deep awareness of the existence of God and of the ancestors.

Second, following Shorter's call for African theologians to develop ways to share Africa's spiritual riches with the world, very little has come up in terms of indigenous African theology. Mbiti's charge that what has been issued is good advice about *how to* do African theology and not the theology itself can still be sounded. We have more prose than poetry, more ambition than practicality in terms of a viable and achievable theological enterprise for presenting African Christianity to the rest of the Church worldwide.

In a world in which Africa is often spoken of more for things that go awry than positive developments that encourage genuine human advancement, the prospect of Africa's contribution to the universal Church is an invitation to believe in Africa. It is a corrective measure as well as an empowerment of Africa's intellectual institutions. It is at this point that this study comes as an attempt to act as a vehicle through which particular aspects of Africa's wealth of cultural values and important human qualities can be shared with the rest of the Church. We can therefore ask the question which this section of the present study will try to respond to: how can Mababu theology become instrumental in sharing the "wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities" with the rest of the Church worldwide? A preliminary assumption based on Pope John Paul II's call, and which this study has so far shown, is that Africa is endowed with a wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities which Mababu theology utilizes as its particular contribution to what some scholars have referred to as Africanization of Christianity.[14]

I will now present three areas which Mababu theology communicates and which can also be shared with the Church worldwide.

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[14] See for example Mugambi, *Christianity and African Culture* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1989), 8-10.

12.1.1 *Promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions*

Mababu theology calls our attention to the importance of looking carefully into African cultures in order to discover those aspects of culture which might have been misunderstood, or forgotten.

Pope John Paul II names some of the spiritual riches of the African peoples:

> Africans have a profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, of the existence of God the Creator and of a spiritual world. The reality of sin in its individual and social forms is very much present in the consciousness of these peoples, as is also the need for rites of purification and expiation (no. 42).

The pontiff highlights certain aspects of African spirituality and theology which Mababu theology can consider as its beginning point in sharing African theology with the rest of Church. It is also the area which the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) called on the theological community as the important place that African theology has in strengthening Christianity in Africa:

> Our own theological thought . . . tries to answer the questions raised by our diverse historical contexts and the actual evolution of our societies; a theological thought which is at one and the same time faithful to the traditions of the Church and respectful of our traditions and languages, that is, our philosophies . . . Only an African theology authentic to the fundamental aspirations of the African peoples shall effectively make Christianity incarnated in the life of the people of Africa.[15]

The first area that Mababu theology is able to share with other Churches is the theological thoughts and philosophical presuppositions of the African peoples.

Scholars are already discussing African theology consciously or unconsciously by taking one or more theological issues (for example the sacrament of marriage, the question of poverty, or the understanding of who Jesus is for an African) and then integrating this understanding into

[15] Cited in Richard Cote, "Seminary Education in Africa," *AFER* 17, no. 3 (May 1975): 135.

the existing theological frameworks of liberation, inculturation, or more recently reconstruction.[16]

Mababu theology begins by recognizing that the current and historical issues in the relationship between Africans and their departed kin and with God are highly complex and multifaceted problems that only a multi-pronged approach can unravel fully. In order to address African ancestors and their significance for an average African Christian in such a manner that Christian faith can have genuine effect in African life, we must develop a unique approach such as Mbiti and Temples pointed out (above). This will enable Christianity to penetrate the spirit world of the African, and have a deep impact on the soul of the African. In order to treat these issues maturely and exhaustively the approach adopted should include the theologies already in place in Africa, especially theologies of liberation, of inculturation, of reconstruction, and neocolonial theology. These are adequate for articulating the various concerns that have been raised within the context of Africa.

Second, Mababu theology may be complemented well by Schreiter's proposal (that I already referred to above) that the gospel, church, and culture are three factors that a local theology ought to define and give continued attention to. According to Schreiter, this leads to "an ever-expanding awareness of the role of each of these factors" as roots that nurture the development of a local theology.

12.1.2 *Ancestral rituals and the problem of human alienation*

In discussing funeral rituals above, we concentrated on their anthropological significance. Perhaps if we pay attention to their spiritual implications within the perspective of Mababu

[16] Ukpong, "Current Theology: The Emergence of African Theologies," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 502.

theology, they can tell us certain truths that can be shared with people outside of Africa. The one area that we may concentrate on is that of human alienation. The funeral rituals demonstrate that some elements of the African beliefs and religious practices parallel certain Judeo-Christian practices. The following ways may be discerned.

First, the rites, as we saw with the example of the Luo funeral rites, reconcile the living with their ancestors. Anthony Barrett made an important conclusion from his study of the Turkana, one of the Nilotic peoples of Kenya: "Reconciliation between the [ancestor] and their progeny is a form of healing and is brought about by an exchange ritual called sacrifice."[17] Failure to reconcile with the ancestors implies a host of misfortunes, including alienation from the society.[18]

The preoccupation with alienation from the ancestors in African cultures reflects a world view that is similar to that of the ancient tribes of Israel: identity is collective, and the worst fate of all is to be "cut off from the people," for the group as community and extended family transmits and sustains life.[19] The African would say, "I am because we are." Mbiti explains that this African belief is "a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man." It implies that whatever happens to an individual happens to the whole group, for an individual must always affirm that "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."[20] Similarly, in ancient Israel, an individual alienation from the community implied alienation from God who protected the people because of his covenant with them. Furthermore, as the moral consciousness

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[17] See the description of the sacrifice over the grave of the deceased in the previous chapter. The sacrifice about which Barrett speaks in this case involves throwing pieces of meat toward the dwelling places of the ancestors. Barrett, *Sacrifice and Prophecy*, pp. 1-20.

[18] Anthony Barrett, *Sacrifice and Prophecy in Turkana Cosmology* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 20.

[19] Leonard V. Kaplan and Charles L. Cohen, eds., *Theology and the Soul of the Liberal State* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 326.

[20] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108-109.

of Israel developed, it was recognized that sin brought with it every evil because it cuts the people off from God, the source of life. Christianity still recognizes this in the concept "sin of the world."[21] The African concern with alienation, therefore, is similar though not identical to Christian concern about sin.

Secondly, the African overcomes alienation and finds reconciliation in rites that are always communal in nature. Several authors highlight Africans' understanding of human participation and solidarity. Nyamiti, for example, says that "man" is regarded as always intimately related to other "fellow-men" such that "one form of existence when considered isolatedly without relation to other forms or beings, is seen to be incomplete and inauthentic. Things are conceived as symbols of each other."[22] In this respect, African religious practices in their tendency to seek reconciliation in rituals that encourage participation and solidarity are similar to Jewish and Christian liturgy.

Third, Barrett highlights an element of cosmic unity that becomes evident in many funeral rites and ceremonies in Africa. At a funeral, the Turkana customs mandate that certain animals be killed by certain people in certain defined ways so as to unite "man, animal, ancestors, and *Akuj* (God) . . . together in a new relationship."[23] For a Turkana, as well as for many, to be in good relationship with the ancestors means being in relationship with *Akuj*, as well as with the physical world of nature, with the social reality of others and with oneself.

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[21] Charles Curran reminds us that "The Old Testament was conscious of the concept of sin of the world developed by some contemporary theologians." Curran and others, such as Piet Schoonenberg, hold that sin does not only affect the individual but also incarnates itself in the structures, customs, and institutions of our environments. See Charles E. Curran, *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 105. See also Piet Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, trans. Joseph Donceel (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 98-123.

[22] Nyamiti, *African Tradition and the Christian God* (Eldoret: Gaba Publications, Spearhead, No. 49), 11.

[23] Barrett, *Dying and Death among the Turkana*, Vol. II, 14.

Fourth, celebrations in Africa (and Africa is well-known for celebrations), as illustrated by funeral rituals in this study, restore cosmic unity, which is sometimes symbolized by the sacrifice of certain birds and animals as we saw in *tero buru* above. According to Magesa, the sacrifice creates a recombination motif when the sacrificial item is united with God or the spirits and the two acts generate, a new relationship, or add new elements into the relationship, between human beings, God, and creation.[24] The ritual thus brings about its ultimate purpose, which is to re-establish the pristine divine order in the universe.[25] Barrett explains how order is established by the symbolisms involved as follows:

> The act of giving or presenting is creative, for it reconstructs a tripartite relation between [God], spirits and ancestors, and man. In the quotidian affairs of life, these three "elements" occupy separate domains. When the animal is immolated, dissected, roasted, thrown to God and the ancestors; and eaten by the men, as smoke and smell ascend to Akuj; then there is being constructed a new entity or super-entity of interrelationships.[26]

Evidently, the African religious beliefs and rites, especially funerary rites, parallel in many ways Judeo-Christian beliefs and liturgy. They are similar in that they are community based, involve sacrifice to overcome alienation that causes a cosmic disorder, and depend on those who have gone before in goodness to act as mediators. Restoration of cosmic order is repeated often through sacrifice. The African moments of celebration provide us with rich spiritual grounds on which the understanding of Christian liturgy may be based.

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[24] Magesa, *African Religion*, 202
[25] Magesa, *African Religion*, 202.
[26] Barrett, *Sacrifice and Prophecy*, 40.

12.1.3 *Health and wholeness*

In order to understand the African's approach to health and wholeness, it is important to keep in mind certain presuppositions on health. For an African, nature, persons, ancestors, and the unseen are bound together in a cosmic oneness. Wellbeing is therefore achieved when an individual has achieved all these aspects of life in harmony with the cosmic totality. As Okoye puts it, the African sees the physical life as health, sufficient food, adequate housing, fertility, and offspring; social and political health as consisting in good neighborly relations, a good name, social justice, sharing, and solidarity with all in building the earthly city; the healthy mystical life as maintaining a balance between God and human beings, spirits and human beings, the departed and the living.[27] When this balance is upset, people experience misfortunes and sufferings. Hence in many African initiated churches "healing" is an integral part of church ministry, the priest being sacrificer, presider at prayer, healer, and psychiatrist. Eugene Elochukwu Uzukwu calls our attention to the religious background within which health and wholeness is viewed in the African cultural worldview. Uzukwu says that for an African, the search and project for life that is meaningful, is its continuity and dynamic progress towards fullness and its realization in the ancestral status and divinization. These are fundamental for our understanding of an African person's perception of ontology and ultimate meaning.[28]

Uzukwu's call does not only add to our knowledge of aspiration of the African in regard to life, it also opens up a framework in which we can see a link in the material and spiritual nature in which God, ancestors, and human beings are one. The World Health Organization seems to have adopted this approach of health and wholeness as "a state of complete physical,

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[27] James C. Okoye, "African Theology," in *Dictionary of Mission : Theology, History, Perspectives* eds. Karl Müller et. al. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 14.

[28] Cited in Juan F. Gorski, *Sharing Diversity in Missiological Research And Education* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Ishvani Kendra, 2006), 185.

mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."[29] In Africa health is more a social and cultural concept than a biological one: a person's sickness is viewed as the result of her or his maladjustment to the social and cultural context. Healing in the traditional sense is a return to social harmony, physical health, and well-being under the eyes of God. To be healed is to recover lost harmony and to calm fear and anguish. In the African Christian view, healing in this sense is very much a function of Christ and the church. James Okoye tells us that many independent churches in African are "uniquely dedicated to healing, and even the mainline churches are experiencing a resurgence of this ministry. In the Christology of Christ the healer, he becomes the 'medicine of life' in the Eucharist and in the sacraments."[30]

It is in this religious background that one understands the African's deep sense of divinity and a true sense of ritual practices that unite the entire community and nature. When Chris Nwaka Egbulem writes about creative worship of the indigenous African Christian Churches, he asserts that healing is an important aspect of worship experience that is promoted in African churches. Egbulem writes:

> The African churches . . . saw healing as accompanying the entire life journey. The role of the medicine man or woman in the village was important not only in daily life but also in the spiritual experiences of the people. The search for healing is ultimately a search for wholeness. In this process, there is no body/soul dichotomy. It is the total person who needs to be saved.[31]

This approach to health and wholeness has been expressed in many ways. For example D. R. Jacobs writes that

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[29] "World Health Organization Act 1947 - First ScheduleWorld," http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/whoa1947273/sch1.html (accessed February 10, 2013).

[30] Okoye, "African Theology", 9-17.

[31] Nwaka Chris Egbulem, "The Liturgical Movement and Catholic Ritual Revision" in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, eds. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 688.

> Traditional Western Christian Theology has some weaknesses even for Western needs, and often has not been seen to be relevant to African problems. Now we must come to the Scriptures to discover God's answers here in our day. If my baby gets sick, I think in scientific terms of the blood, the germs and medicine. If Wambura's baby gets sick, he asks Why? and Who? He begins to look in the community and to the ancestors for the person who has brought on the disease. The Scripture has the answers for both of us. But now our task is to find the answer for Wambura.[32]

Since everything comes from God and inevitably returns to God, all are imbued by God's imprint within them, they bear the image of God in some way, an imprint or image that African religious philosophy has referred to metaphorically as *vital force* and which also permeates the whole society. *Vital force* can therefore be conceived beyond African thought categories as an attribute of God, which is the living energy, the sum total of and infinite energy of the created and uncreated cosmos. The responsibility of every human being is to zealously guard the *vital force* within, around, and about them so as to be able to achieve their aims and objective of returning back to God in their wholeness.

Logically, human beings are their true selves only when they are united with their source through this *vital force*, with their ancestors, and with their fellow human beings. Since to date there is no conceptual tool for presenting the bond of communion that unites the tripartite Church of the living, the Church in purgatory, and the triumphant Church in heaven, perhaps this African traditional philosophy and religious category may serve as a fitting contextual methodology for speaking of the vast network that unites the living and the dead and the living amongst themselves.

[32] Cited in Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 158.

Remaining in a state of good health often implies being vigilant so as not to fall a victim of forces that threaten one's *vital force*. Magesa explains how sickness poses a threat to *vital force* as follows:

> All illness, but particularly a serious one, means erosion of power, and a sick person is spoken of as "losing" or "gaining power as the illness progresses or recedes. Thus, a person might become so sick that she loses the "power" to sit, stand, or even the power to cough or breathe. This power is not merely the energy to perform those human functions, but the decline of one's being itself.[33]

When it is perceived that *vital force* is diminishing or has diminished in one's being, culturally specific interventions are usually carried out by use of rites and rituals. The Christian has an advantage because being with Jesus means being with him who is the source and ultimate mediator of the life-force as well as the giver of all. This is beautifully expressed in the Zairian Mass (more of it below) in its penitential formula: "Lord Our God, just as the blood-sucker sticks unto our skin and sucks our blood, evil has invaded us, our life has been diminished."[34] Therefore the African is concerned with any and all ways by which *vital force* is diminished, be it possession by spirits, physical ailments, substance abuse, or behavioral disorders (such as depression, schizophrenia, phobia, panic attacks, eating disorders, or sexual dysfunction). When an approach of health and wholeness lays emphasis on all possible ways by which a person's health is affected, it becomes easier to incorporate the person's positive spiritual elements into the therapeutic process.

For an African, the hunger for fullness of life is usually expressed in various ways, for example, in terms of overcoming the malevolent spirits that threaten human life in their environment. That is why African Christians readily recognize in God the power to overcome the

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[33] Magesa, *African Religion*, 178.
[34] Cited in Egbulem, *The Power of Afrocentric Celebrations*, 149.

Christian's physical, emotional, and socio-economic problems. Paul Akunne has analyzed this need and expressed it as follows:

> Power is an essential virtue for our Christian life because without it, we cannot . . . overcome all the vile of the devil in our life and in the world. . . . It aids us in overcoming our weakness, identifying ourselves as God's sons and daughters (Jn 1:12). Power enables us to have access to God in knowing and possessing all that God has given us as a birthright. Power enthrones us to prince-ship to be powerful and to prevail as God's own.[35]

This need for God's power is consistent with the African's Christological supposition eloquently expressed by Mbiti as *Christus Victor*, according to which Jesus mediates God's power and becomes a means by which the powers of evil, which held the African under their dominion, are defeated. The ultimate goal in the understanding of health and wholeness is therefore the fullness of life that Christ announced that he came to give (Jn 10:10).

By applying Mababu theology as a starting point for reflecting on health and wholeness we adopt a perspective that moves from a diagnosis-focused to a person-focused one; striving to get rid of a disease to stressing a positive general wellbeing of an individual.[36] A Mababu theological perspective offers solutions to health that include assuming positive and health sustaining lifestyles, a fight against evil spirits, and building self-worth and self-esteem in order to replenish the *vital force* that has been lost.

Contemporary African theological currents call for indigenous faces of Christ which include Christ as a healer. The traditional healer is a very important character in the African society. Since healing played a very important part in the mission of Jesus on earth, we should not be surprised that this category has become important in African Christology.

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[35] Paul Chinedu Akunne, *Power With God* (Lagos, Nigeria: Ikechbenjamin, 2004), 11-12.

[36] This approach is beginning to take place in many Western health institutions over the past few years, as demonstrated for example in Ronald W. Manderscheid et al, eds., "Evolving Definitions of Mental Illness and Wellness," *Preventing Chronic Disease: Public Health Research, Practice, and Policy* 7, no. 1 (2010): 1-6.

Mbiti speaks of the idea of *Christus Victor*. But Kolie (1991) has warned about a too simplistic assimilation of this African category given the reality of death, sickness, and suffering in African everyday life: a continuing oppression for the people of the continent today. Healing must respond more effectively to today's sicknesses. All in all, the understanding of the disease and ways of healing in Africa offer the rest of the Church world wide food for thought so that other cultures could reflect on their own concepts and customs.

12.2 The Church as family

In the sociological foundations for drawing parallels between African ancestors and *communio sanctorum* above, I have pointed out that communal living is one of the most important and deeply rooted convictions of African peoples. Perhaps that conviction may become the point of departure for reflecting on and recommending the family as a model for the Church.

There seems to be an inborn experience for an African to recognize the value of the community, to appreciate the family and community as the places to be born, live, and die. African spirituality discerns a vital link between a person and the members of the same family, clan, or community. Moreover, the kinship system in Africa reinforces the traditional notion of the extended family and preserves the predominant communal style of living. This is the sense in which it can be said that the African is incomplete when alone.[37] Kofi Asare Opoku summarizes it beautifully when he writes:

> If I gain my humanity by entering into a relationship with other members of the family, both living and dead, then it follows that my humanity comes to me as a gift. This does not mean to say that it is not mine, that my being is part of the group, so that I have no individual value and density. It means rather that it is not something that I can acquire, or develop, by my own isolated power. I can only

[37] See Michael G. Peletz, "Kinship Studies in Late Twentieth-Century," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 343-372.

> exercise or fulfill my humanity as long as I remain in touch with others, for it is they who empower me.[38]

The African finds meaning and fulfillment when in communion with others. It is the communal living that moves the African to seek solidarity with others and to be open to meeting new people. This sense of family is sometimes expressed in the unique African style of hospitality in which a guest is readily welcomed and made part of the host's family.[39]

In 1994 the Bishops considered this African traditional mind-set and at the African Synod nudged the African theologians to propose to the universal church the implications of the model of the Church as family of God.[40] The bishops instructed that

> It is earnestly to be hoped that theologians in Africa will work out the theology of the church as family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarily with other images of the church.[41]

Before theologians in African can work out the theology of the Church as family, it will be a daunting task for them to first preach to their own continent where very often that image is far from being a reality. The fact that there are refugees virtually everywhere in Africa is an indication that Africa is far from being exemplary of this model. Africa's only claim to authority to share the model with the world perhaps lies in the fact it is near the people's daily experiences in discussions or performance. But refugees point not so much to these local issues as to the tragic effects of the way our world operates at the international level.

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[38] Cited in Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academics, 2003), 251.

[39] The Luo proverb "*Jo-dala chiemo e lwet welo*" (The hosts eat at the guests' hands) implies a symbiotic relationship between the hosts and guests: while the guest is provided with hospitality, the guest provides the host with a reason to celebrate, thereby introducing an extraordinary and festive situation which would not have been created without the guest. The practice of hospitality acquires a moral perspective by its demand for the practice of social justice, the promotion of life, and the well-being of others.

[40] Bujo et al., eds., *African Theology in the 21st Century*, 230.

[41] Bujo et al., eds., *African Theology in the 21st Century*, 230.

Some critics have charged that the image of the Church as a family of God can lend itself to abuse in Africa, especially considering the patriarchal structures that are embedded in African cultures. Donatus Oluwa Chukwu, for example, has observed that women continue to suffer in their families due to the patriarchal manner in which African societies are stratified. According to Chukwu, the model of Church as family would imply that women take the place of wives as in natural families and that men would play the role of husbands. Chukwu concludes that this model would exacerbate the spiral of violence in African societies.[42]

Pope John Paul II has offered some of the most practical insights that can help in the understanding of the spiritual bonds in the Church. In his encyclical *Solliciudo Rei Socialis* the pontiff directs our attention to solidarity and charity as the distinguishing marks of Christ's disciples. He calls on the Christian community to look beyond human natural bonds and through faith focus on Christian communion. The pontiff concludes that

> At that point, awareness of the common fatherhood of God, of the brotherhood of all in Christ – "children in the Son" - and of the presence and life-giving action of the Holy Spirit will bring to our vision of the world a new criterion for interpreting it. Beyond human and natural bonds, already so close and strong, there is discerned in the light of faith a new model of the unity of the human race, which must ultimately inspire our solidarity (no. 40).

In suggesting the family as a model for the Church, this study presents the family as an ideal with which the Church may be measured in order to enhance the full meaning of being Church and to raise a local Church to a lofty level. The implicit statement in this proposal is that it is possible to achieve certain ideals of a natural family if the full meaning of what it means to be Church is explored. It would be up to the individuals and groups of every locality to look to the ideal of family and to implement it in their lives, taking their respective circumstances into

[42] Donatus Oluwa Chukwu, *The Church as the Extended Family of God: Toward a New Direction For African Ecclesiology* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Publications, 2011), 156.

account. This proposal envisions a Christian who understands himself or herself as born into a Christian *family* and plunged into the currents of its life. The ability to be identified within the Christian family and community, especially through renewal of God's grace in the life of the Christian and through participation with others in the community, will affect the Christian's very existence and survival.

12.3 Promoting a greater understanding of the Trinity

Nyamiti has famously referred to God as ancestor, Jesus as ancestor, or brother-ancestor, and Holy Spirit as the oblation of the Father and the Son.[43] Can Nyamiti's language be helpful for presenting Mababu theology? Can such expressions benefit the universal Church?

Before we can cast any reflection on Nyamiti's contribution, we need to pay attention to the concerns that other scholars have expressed in the articulation of God's relationship with human beings. Deborah Malacky Belonick, an expert in Nicene theology, asserts that

> In the theology of the early Church, the traditional Trinitarian terms are precise theological terms. Therefore these terms are not exchangeable. Through them humanity encounters the persons of the Trinity and through them relationships among members of the Godhead are defined. . . . There is no historical evidence that the terms "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" were products of a patriarchal structure, "male" theology, or a hierarchical Church.[44]

Belonick's assertion raises very important questions, two of which are: (1) what does she mean by asserting that the Trinitarian terms are not exchangeable? (2) From where do the Trinitarian terms obtain their authority to remain the same: from the Scriptures, the Church's tradition, or from the magisterium?

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[43] See Vähäkangas, *In Search of Foundations for African Catholicism*, 179-243, and Nyamiti, *Christ our Ancestor*.

[44] Deborah Malacky Belonick, "Revelation and Metaphors:The Significance of Trinitarian Names, Father, Son and Holy Spirit," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40, no. 3 (1985): 36.

As every student of systematic theology knows, the doctrine of the Trinity evolved through the conflation of selective pieces of scripture with the philosophical and religious ideas of ancient Hellenistic milieu.[45] The Trinity remains an important aspect of Christianity that poses deep and difficult problems to Christian believers. In spite of centuries of study and explications, the doctrine remains a subject that continues to daunt professional dogmaticians and ordinary Christians alike.

There is the problem of the one-and-the-many or unity-diversity which scholars throughout the centuries have had to contend with. On the one hand, the doctrine says that there are three distinct Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that each of these Persons "is God". On the other hand, it says that there is one and only one God. How is the Christian believer to resolve this apparent contradiction?

While theologians and philosophers throughout the ages have struggled to understand the doctrine of the Trinity, African theologians seem to have become particularly interested in the doctrine only fairly recently. Thus Bediako tells us how in the 70s, Bolaji Idowu persistently affirmed the same God in the Judeo-Christian and in African traditional religions as a way to establish "the continuity of God from the African pre-Christian past into the present Christian experience."[46] Several African scholars held slightly differing but not divergent views. For example, Mbiti noted that pre-Christian Africa understood God as an immaterial being that is

[45] The historical and theological development of the doctrine of the Trinity is well documented. See for example Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); Marian Hillar, *From Logos to Trinity: The Evolution of Religious Beliefs From Pythagoras to Tertullian* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[46] Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 281-284.

purely spiritual. Thus people use different names such as "the Great Spirit, the Fathomless Spirit, the Ever-Present Spirit or the God of Wind and Breath."[47]

These attempts to examine the questions of God in depth by examining the theological principles that relate to questions of faith and inculturation did not go without objections. Okot p'Bitek, who is known for his scathing attack on African scholars who tried to establish theoretical arguments for the continuity of African traditional religion with Christianity, is probably the strongest opponent of the inculturation initiatives. In regard to the understanding of God, p'Bitek accused Mbiti of amalgamating bits and pieces of the ideas of God taken from various parts of Africa.[48] According to p'Bitek, African scholars such as Mbiti, Idowu, Danquah, Busia, Kenyatta and Sengor were "intellectual smugglers" who simply vested the African gods in "awkward Hellenic garments."[49] P'Bitek concluded that "the African deities of the books . . . are creations of students of African religions. They are all beyond recognition to the ordinary Africans in the countryside."[50]

The African scholars that p'Bitek refers to as "intellectual smugglers" were, from our point of view, scholars who began the difficult yet necessary journey of inculturation. Other renowned theologians did the same; for example, Robert M. Grant studied classical theism in

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[47] Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 53.

[48] Okot p'Bitek, *Religion of the Central Luo* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1971), 7-46.

[49] P'Bitek, *Religion of the Central Luo*, 50.

[50] P'Bitek, *Religion of the Central Luo* 50-88. Is p'Bitek justified in making such accusations? These scholars that p'Bitek accused produced scholarly literature that was recognized both in Africa and beyond, literature that encouraged scholarship in Africa and beyond. One may argue that p'Bitek was living in denial of the enculturation that was happening in the encounter between Christianity and the African cultures. The scholars demonstrated above all that African cultures contained elements of the self-revelation of God that was comparable to the Judeo-Christian conception of God. Furthermore, p'Bitek's failure to see a fundamental unity in the various African traditional religions and cultures reflects an approach which is no longer taken by modern anthropologists, ethnolinguists, and African historiographers who argue for fundamental unity of the African peoples. See also J. H. O. Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics, and the African Intellectual Culture* (Brill: Leiden & Boston, 2007), 1-7.

regard to Trinity in the works of Christian writers such as Aristides, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria and concluded that

> these early writers, while in every instance maintaining the primacy of faith in response to the self-revelation of God, do not hesitate to make use of the points of contact between God's revelation and the modes of expression prevalent in Hellenistic Judaism and in Graeco-Roman philosophy generally. . . . The New Testament writers make use of terms which they share with some of their contemporaries. . . .But the fact that it could be employed at all left room for the development of various kinds of philosophical theologies.[51]

What the writers in Grant's study did has been duplicated in many places in which Christianity has been planted in order to bring the doctrine of God into the indigenous faith of people. It is the same exercise that the alleged theological smugglers did in an attempt to Christianize Christian Africa's sense of God. Thus Joseph Danquah studied the Akan people, discovered their anthropomorphism and wrote:

> The Akan doctrine of God teaches that He is the great ancestor. He is true high God and manlike ancestor. He deserves to be worshipped and is worshipped in the visible ancestral head, the good chief of the community.[52]

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen tells us that most African Trinitarian reflections utilize social analogy of one kind or another.[53] Of such scholars, Nyamiti is perhaps the foremost African inculturation theologian who has developed a complete social analogy of the Trinity. In the case of Nyamiti this is the traditional concept of the Ancestor.[54]

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[51] Robert M.Grant, *The Early Christian Doctrine of God* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1966), 12-14.

[52] Joseph B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1944), 28.

[53] Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspective* (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 356.

[54] Nyamiti is known for Christianizing African sense of God according to Western thought categories. Nyamiti has made a distinct and deliberate attempt to articulate Christian concepts by applying African traditional concepts and symbols, which are taken from African cultures and religions.

Nyamiti takes the social analogy of community and sees an ancestral communication within the Trinity. According to Nyamiti, "The Father is the Ancestor from whom the Son descends in the eternal moment, who is thus the Descendant."[55] Nyamiti's insight has far reaching consequences which have not been fully developed so far. Stated differently, he is proposing a first procession whereby God the Father is the parent ancestor of the God the Son. The Son is the descendant of the Father. Nyamiti further explains that the interdependence between the Father and the Son becomes "the foundation of the mutual giving of the Oblation, or in traditional terminology, spiration of the Spirit."[56] Nyamiti concludes that

> Sanctity, as well as the Fatherhood and the Sonship of the first two divine persons . . . are important constitutive elements of divine Ancestorship and Descendency. It is thanks to these qualities that the two are entitled to ritual communication in the Spirit. This *title* or right is inseparable from the idea of the Holy Spirit; namely, in the Trinity the Father and the Son *qua* Ancestor and Descendant cannot be understood except in terms of their intrinsic relation to their mutual communication in the divine Spirit seen as their mutual Oblation.[57]

As a result of this Trinitarian relationship, Nyamiti asserts that "in God Ancestorship and Descendancy are essentially sacred, ritualistic, Eucharistic and pneumatic categories."[58]

With Nyamiti's presentation of the Trinitarian construction, he demonstrates that Christianity does not have to be confined to speaking about the Trinity only in Western categories. His presentation fits well with traditional formulations of the doctrine while at the same time renders the Trinity logically coherent by applying concepts that appeal to traditional African spiritual sensibilities. Moreover, Nyamiti's representation fits African peoples of orally-

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[55] See Kärkkäinen, *In Search of Foundations For African Catholicism*, 183.

[56] Kärkkäinen, *In Search of Foundations For African Catholicism*, 185. See also Nyamiti, "Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of Humankind: Methodological and Trinitarian Foundations," *The Catholic University of Eastern Africa: Studies in African Christian Theology* 1 (2005): 70-73.

[57] Nyamiti, "Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of Humankind," 77.

[58] Nyamiti, "Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of Humankind," 78.

based and collective cultures which have different thinking processes from literate and individualist Western cultures.[59]

In fact it will be beneficial for Mababu theology to adopt Nyamiti's presentation. However, an important observation must be made before such adoption happens. We need to visualize the situation of an African who is accustomed to seeing connections between realities, orally. Nyamiti's presentation is marked by a purely human one-sided anthropocentricism which can potentially distort the transcendence of God. So although Nyamiti's Trinitarian construction represents a genuine synthesis of African conceptions of relationships, that representation is not distinctly Christian. By placing so much weight on relationships (ancestry, kinship, oblation), it can potentially downplay some of the tenets of classical theism, for example divine simplicity, according to which God is absolutely simple being, completely devoid of any sort of metaphysical complexity.[60]

Within the mindset of Mababu theology, we may take an African proverb, one of the standard pedagogical devices in Africa, for example the Swahili proverb, "Kucha Mungu si kilemba cheupe" (The fear of God is not wearing a white turban). Although this proverb on its face value simply tells a listener what the fear of God is not, its explication may involve spelling out what the fear of God actually is, which may involve integrating it with an understanding of Eastern patristic thought in soteriology commonly cast in terms of *theösis* or *theopoiêsis* ("divinization"), according to which God confers on human beings the blessing of certain divine

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[59] See Robert Hurteau, "Navigating the Limitations of Western Approaches to the Intercultural Encounter: The Works of Walter Ong and Harry Trandis," *Missiology: An International Review* 34, no. 2 (April 2006): 202.

[60] For a better treatment of "Divine simplicity," see C. B. Martin, "God, the Null Set and Divine Simplicity" in *The Challenge of Religion Today*, ed. John King-Farlow (New York: Science History Publications, 1976), 138-143. See also Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

attributes.[61] An African may learn therefore that externalized Christianity is of little value, but the transformation that it brings is absolute. To live in the ancestral community of God and to be divinized will be more convincing and spiritually fulfilling to an African whose desire for salvation consists mainly in victory over evil forces attenuate life.

A reflection on the Trinity is an acknowledgement that we are touching on the innermost core of Christian theology. Becoming engaged with the core of Christian theology ought to remind us not to confuse secondary or tertiary teachings of Christianity with essential ones, thereby undermining what truly pertains to the foundation of Christianity. That core entails affirming the existence of a loving, triune God, the creator, sustainer, and guide of all, who also destines his people for eternal life.

The next area of importance is reflection on the person of Jesus Christ, whose paschal mystery transforms his believers into new creatures by the Holy Spirit. It is to Jesus that we shall now turn.

12.4 Promoting a greater understanding Jesus as ancestor

Ernest Sambou asserts that

> in most African countries the prime theological urgency consists in discovering the true face of Jesus Christ, that Christians may have living experience of that face, in depth and according to their genius.[62]

Sambou's assertion is just one of the numerous assertions made by a number of theologians to present Christ with an African face. It is an assertion which implicitly calls both to develop the Christological implications of African cultural understanding of what it means to be human, as

[61] J. Warren Smith, "Divine Ecstasy and Divine Simplicity: The Eros Motif in Pseudo-Dionysius's Soteriology," *Pro Ecclesia* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 213.

[62] Cited in Schreiter, *The Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 85.

well as to develop a theological framework for understanding the mystery of Christ for the lives of African Christians. Furthermore, to the extent that the universal is contained in the particular, such African Christological models may also have implications for the entire Church's understanding of the mystery of Christ and must themselves be subject to review in the light of the lived faith of the entire Church.

Sambou and other scholars of African theology have examined social roles in African society and the implications of such roles for Christology. The more explicit call came from Mbiti in 1968 to his fellow African theologians to build their theological reflections on four pillars, namely (1) the Bible; (2) the theology of the older churches especially, as seen in European scholarship and theological tradition; (3) the traditional heritage of Africa; and (4) the living experience of the church in Africa.[63]

The scholars who have made meaningful contributions to the Christological discourses that apply African indigenous perspectives are numerous. To include their individual perspectives would be beyond the scope of the present study. However, I will list a few outstanding names (beginning with first names in an alphabetical order) for the sake of clarity: Abraham Akrong, Albert Nolan, Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, Anslem Titiama Sanon, Bénézet Bujo, Cécé Kolié, Charles Nyamiti, Douglas W. Waruta, Efoé Julien Pénoukou, Emilio J. M. de Carvalho, Enyi Ben Udoh, François Kabasélé, Gwinyai Muzorewa, Harry Sawyerr, Jean-Marc Éla, John Mary Waliggo, John Mbiti, Jesse N. K. Mugambi, John Pobee, Kä Mana, Kofi Appiah-Kubi, Kwame Bediako, Laurenti Magesa, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, O. Nkwoka, Pashington Obeng, Peter N. Wachege, R. Buana Kibougi, S. Maimela, Takatso Mofokeng, Teresa Hinga, and Ukachukwu Chris Manus.

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[63] Mbiti, "Some African Concepts of Christology," in George F. Vicedom (ed.), *Christ and the Younger Churches* (London: SPCK, 1972), p. 51.

These scholars' perception of the contextual challenges posed to Christology by contemporary realities in Africa has produced a plethora of Christological initiatives.[64] They mainly viewed Jesus as life-giver (Jesus as healer, and as traditional healer),[65] Jesus as firstborn among the living (elder brother),[66] Jesus firstborn among the dead (hence the category of ancestor and proto-ancestor),[67] Jesus as mediator (Jesus as ancestor, and as proto-ancestor),[68] and Jesus as leader (Jesus as chief, king, master of initiation, and as liberator).[69]

Although our interest is with the image of Jesus as an ancestor, it is important for me to present a brief outline of how Jesus has been perceived from an African perspective by the scholars. This will help us to see how the theological history of Africa in the past few years has been marked by a proliferation of portraits of Jesus, as well as show us how the ancestor image fits in with and accentuates the significance of Mababu theology. I will therefore highlight some of the major titles/images of Jesus in Africa. (I describe them in alphabetical order beginning with the first letter of the image):

1. **Ancestor**: Of all the various images that led to the various Christological formulations in African Christology, the image of the ancestor takes the elephant's share of scholars' attention. This image may be seen as the focal point from which various theological

[64] There are excellent studies of the Christological initiatives in Africa. Two such studies are Diane Stinton's *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* and Schreiter's *Faces of Jesus in Africa*. These volumes contain good examples of well-researched and persuasively argued study of Christology in Africa. They document the different phases of the development of Christology in Africa beginning with the "latent Christologies" from the 1950s through the "emergent Christologies" in the 1980s to the present time.

[65] Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 54-103.

[66] John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levinson Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 102-104; Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 102-104; Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 116-127.

[67] Levison and Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 104-106.

[68] Levison and Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 102-106; Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 109-142.

[69] Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, pp. 177-214; Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 61-62; Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 85-102. Levison and Levison apply "Key figures of the community" in reference to Jesus' leadership. See Levison and Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 106-111. A desirable ideal would be to give a detailed description of how each of these categories came about. However, such a task is beyond the objectives of this study.

themes are being addressed; hence its relevance to the present study. From the observation that the African ancestors are the mediators of their kin, the highest link after God in the chain of being, scholars have concluded that the divine *vital force* flows from God through the ancestors to their kin. The ancestors are able to increase or diminish the *vital force* of earthly beings. But since Jesus, Son of God, has come so that God's children may have life in its fullest sense, and since he continuously strengthens and nourishes the life of Christian believers, Christ can also be seen an ancestor. Thus John S. Pobee, writing from within the context of Akan society in Ghana, refers to Jesus as *Nana*, "the Great and Greatest Ancestor." For Pénoukou, whose society of origin is the Ewe-Mina of Togo, Christ is *ancêtre-joto*, that is, Christ is the ancestor who is the source of life, the one who generates and re-generates life.[70] Nyamiti sees Christ as the *Elder Brother par excellence*, the one who existed from the very beginning and is closest to God, the origin of all life. Bujo expands this model of brother and sees him as Proto-Ancestor by focusing on his unique role in the history of salvation, first among the brother-ancestors, the source of life, and highest model of ancestorship.[71]

2. **Brother and Elder Brother**: The image of Jesus as brother is perhaps the oldest that was explicitly confessed. The Kimbangu AIC in Congo had a hymn that sang of "Our God, Jesus, brother of us all/ Jesus, take from us our sufferings/ Come and help us on earth, O

[70] Pénoukou, "Réalité Africaine et Salut en Jésus Christ," *Spiritus* 89 (1982). See also Nicholas Ibeawuchi Mbogu, *Jesus in Post-Missionary Africa: Issues and Questions in African Contextual Christology* (Santa Cruz, CA: GRIN Velag, San Press, 2012), 212.

[71] Nyamiti has doubted the validity of Bujo's assertion that Christ is Proto-ancestor. Nyamiti wonders whether Bujo's use of "proto-ancestor" adequately represents Bujo's interpretation. Nyamiti argues that (i) "proto" signifies "first" or "model" and does not necessarily mean "unique" or "higher than others"; (ii) "God the Father is the Ancestor of the Logos and our ancestor too." Consequently the reference to Christ as "proto-ancestor" cannot be applied to express the uniqueness of Christ's ancestorship to us. See his *Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of Humankind: Methodological and Trinitarian Foundations*, vol. 1 (Nairobi: Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2006), pp. x-xi.

Jesus."[72] Nyamiti's reference to Jesus as Brother Ancestor is well-known. The applicability of the image is articulated well by Harry Sawyerr who observed that

> To present Jesus as the first-born among many brethren who with him together form the Church is in true keeping with African notions. For Christians an effort must be made to bring home the mystical relation between Christ and the Christian of which St. Paul speaks.[73]

Nyamiti sees parallels between African Brother-Ancestorship and Jesus' relationship to humanity as linked by his consanguineous ties to humanity after his death, his supernatural status, his role as model of virtue exhibited in life, his supernatural communication beyond the grave, and his role as the mediator. He argues that Jesus unites all believers in the one supreme God and in the one Family of God.[74] Curiously the image was first used very early on in 1844 by the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who referred to Christ as brother or elder brother.[75] The image could have a universal appeal beyond Africa.

3. **Chief**: François Kabasélé saw the role of Christ as similar to that of the African chief. In many typical African contexts, the chief ensures that the *vital force* that originates in God is transmitted to the people entrusted to him. The chief also must protect the people from any evil power. Since all power belongs ultimately to God who is the Chief of the universe, Jesus is Chief since he is the Chief's son and emissary and since all power belongs to him. Kabasélé concluded that Jesus is the Chief par excellence, the mighty hero who overcomes the power of evil for the African.

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[72] Cited in Stinton, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 147.

[73] Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism: Towards a New Christian Encounter with Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), 73-74.

[74] Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 61.

[75] Corbin Volluz, "Jesus Christ as Elder Brother," *Brigham Young University Studies* 5, no. 2 (2006): 142.

4. **Guest**: The image "guest" is very strong and so important that the Nigerian scholar Enyi Ben Udoh develops a Christology focused on it. Udoh argues that since Jesus was "imposed" on Africa during the colonial and missionary period, he is first and foremost a stranger among Africans. Moreover, as often as he remains in Western garb and not yet indigenized in Africa, he is an "illegal alien." To this dilemma, Udoh proposes the image of Christ as Africa's guest. Inculturation is therefore the process of naturalization by which Christ's status becomes that of a kin.[76]
5. **Healer**: According to Shorter, the title of Jesus as healer was first proposed by the Congolese writer R. Buana Kibongi.[77] Cécé Kolié has made substantial contribution in this title of Jesus by first arguing that the traditional titles of Jesus such as Master of Initiation, Ancestor *par excellent* and so on are outgrowths of post-Vatican II Western

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[76] Enyi Ben Udoh *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa* (Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity) (Frankfurt; Bern; New York; Paris: Peter Lang Pub Inc, 1988). Bediako has challenged any assumption that Christianity is alien to African culture. He highlights the parallels between African traditional religion and Christianity, asserting the need to acknowledge and own Christianity as a non-Western religion. Bediako also asserts that given the shift of Christianity's center of gravity to the "third world" and Africa in particular, Jesus may no longer be considered as a guest in Africa, thus Christianity has come of age in Africa as "an African religion." Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 179. We have explored Mbiti's suggestions on how Christ could have been always present in African traditional religions. Udo's suggestion of "guest" tag is potentially confusing because it is not clear *when* Christ is no longer a guest. I wonder, how long must Christ be present in Africa in order to be an indigenous African? In Swahili for example, a well-known proverb advises that *Mgeni siku ya tatu mpe jembe* (A guest must be given a hoe on the third day) to imply that after passage of some reasonable amount of time, a guest is no longer a guest and must mingle with the hosts naturally and take up the responsibilities of daily provisions to sustain life.

[77] Kibongi argued that the traditional *nganga* (an African traditional physician) is a healer and a revealer, which is the proper role of Christ in a superior way, and that the African Christian encounters Christ in the light of his experience of the Christian priest as both God's doctor and God's evangelist. See Shorter, "Folk Christianity and Functional Christianity," *African Ecclesial Review* 23, no. 3 (1984): 136; R. Buana Kibongi, "Priesthood," in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, eds. Kwesi A. Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth, 1969) 47-56. Shorter himself and a few other notable scholars have made modest contributions to how Africans view the healing role of Jesus among the African peoples. See Shorter *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: Approaches to Healing and Wholeness* (London: Geoffrey Chapman; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985); Matthew Schoffeleers, "Folk Christology in Africa: The Dialectics of the Nganga Paradigm," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 19, no. 2 (1989): 157-83; Schoffeleers "Christ as the Medicine-man and the Medicine-man as Christ: A Tentative History of African Christological Thought," *Man and Life: Journal of the Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology - Calcutta* 8, no. 1 & 2, 11-28.

orientation that have no support among the people.[78] According to Kolié to proclaim Jesus as the Great Healer is more relevant to the African "millions who starve in the Sahel, to victims of injustice and corruption, and to the paralytic afflicted of the tropical and Equatorial forests". He concludes that Jesus is a healer because (1) healings were central elements in his ministry (2) through his own sufferings he is present in human sufferings.[79]

6. **Master of initiation**: This title was advanced mainly by Anselm Sanon, the Catholic bishop in Burkina Faso. Sanon considered initiation in most African cultures as an ongoing process from childhood to ancestorhood that makes Africans progressively more fully human. He saw the role of Christ as the one who leads the Africans through the various initiation rites in life, rites that are associated with various stages of life—birth, puberty, marriage, and death.[80]

What can we make out of these images and titles of Jesus in Africa? Can any transformational dynamics in the Christological application of Christ as ancestor and other portraits help African Christians to live with their dead kin and to experience the salvific potential in Jesus Christ? Additionally, can the portraits be beneficially shared with the universal Church?

To respond to these questions, let us first look at the dissenting voices, those scholars who assert that Christological formulation in African traditional concepts is not helpful.

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[78] Cécé Kolié, "Jesus as Healer?" in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Schreiter, 142. See also Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 65.

[79] Küster, *The many Faces of Jesus Christ*, 65. See also Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 141-8.

[80] See Raymond Moloney, "African Christology," *Theological Studies* 48 (1987): 506-507. See also Sanon's other studies: *Enraciner l'Évangile: Initiations Africaines et Pédagogie de la Foi* (Paris: Cerf, 1982) and "Jésus, Maître d'Initiation," *Chemins de la Christologie Africaine*, 143-66.

James Okoye has summarized some of the main points of such voices whose objections raise questions such as the dangers of using the image of ancestor, the qualification of Christ as an ancestor, and the usefulness of the image of ancestor for Christ.[81] Okoye's presentation requires a response which is obviously beyond the scope of this study. A book that was written by an international and interdisciplinary team of biblical historians, theologians and other scholars who are familiar with the various objections raised against these portraits concluded that

> despite the current inconclusiveness, what lies beyond dispute is that in proposing this image from its own context of faith, Christianity in Africa is making a decisive impact upon the ongoing development of Christian thought.[82]

Moreover, our purpose here is to point out that a unique theologizing by certain theologians in Africa is going on, a theologizing which is potentially beneficial not only for Africa but for the universal Church.

Other objections have been expressed by Shorter. His objection to applying the analogy of ancestor to Christ is perhaps the one that most deserves our attention. Shorter begins by saying that "some elements" should be "detached" from the traditional "ancestor" veneration, and proposed as Christological parallels to the universal Church. Shorter, however, does not state what the elements to be detached are. Shorter goes ahead to criticize that

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[81] Okoye's summery is as follows:

> Does seeing Christ as ancestor limit his divinity? It would seem also that the African relation to the ancestors is more of a mutual entanglement than a living communion. A celibate, as Christ was, could hardly become an ancestor in the tradition; besides, the manner of Christ's death would not qualify him as an African ancestor. There may be issues of translation. It is not clear whether the people's faith associates Christ with the *muzimu*, the spirits of the dead toward whom the people entertain some ambivalent feelings. More seriously, one of the leading African theologians, J. S. Mbiti, has declared that the theory of "*vital force*" cannot be applied to other African peoples with whose life and ideas he is familiar. Is this a case where some African peoples have certain fundamental values not shared with others? Questions have also been posed concerning the method of dialoguing with "Catholic doctrine" instead of shaping a fresh perspective beginning with the Bible. Okoye, "African Theology," 9-17.

[82] Leslie Houlden, *Jesus: The Complete Guide* (London; New York: Continuum, 2003), l, 9.

> 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."[83]

Although a comprehensive response to both Okoye's summary of dissenting voices and Shorter's objections would be too big a task for this present study, we at least may say that in some respects, the work of extrapolating the mystery of Christ from an African perspective is not unlike the work of extrapolating the same in the Old Testament images that foreshadow him: king, priest, prophet, lamb, water, bread, et cetera. As a matter of fact, historical Christian reflection on the mystery of Christ has never limited itself to biblical sources.[84] There is, therefore, nothing surprising that African theologians are seeking to do the same today. Furthermore, five points become clear from the Christological portraits we have seen above.

First, they demonstrate the strength and vigor of theological discourse in Africa. Mbiti has reminded us that Christology is both the foundation and the goal of Christian theology, the aspect of the Church's life which determines the whole of Christian theology. Mbiti says:

> The final test for the validity and usefulness of any theological contribution is Jesus Christ. Since his Incarnation, Christian Theology ought properly to be Christology, for Theology falls or stands on how it understands, translates and interprets Jesus Christ at a given time, place and human situation.[85]

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[83] Shorter, "Ancestor Veneration Revisited," *African Ecclesial Review* 25, no. 4 (1983): 202.

[84] Two examples are in order here for illustration: (1) in apostolic times, Paul was forced to adapt his explanations of Christ to the "Spirit People" of Corinth who were influenced by the Alexandrian school of philosophy. See Jerome Murphy-O'Conner, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 302-304; (2) in medieval European sources, we see a similar process in the portrait of Christ as the warrior-hero in "The Dream of the Rood," which is the oldest surviving poem in an English dialect. See John C. Pope (ed.), *Seven Old English Poems*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1981).

[85] Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter Between New Testament and African Traditional Concepts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 190.

Second, no one portrait of Jesus can adequately articulate and encapsulate the role of Jesus in the life of the Christian believer. The "traditional" Western constructs are not able to adequately express the depth of Christ's richness. Furthermore, the thought categories represented by each portrait demonstrates that every cultural group of people cannot simply accept a portrait of Christ at face value. Every portrait presupposes a thought world that might be perfectly sensible to one cultural group of believers and completely alien to another culture. The catechetical challenge lies in bringing an appreciable degree of coherence to the explication of who Jesus is by appealing to the most uniting factors, such as ancestry, brotherhood, kingship, and so on.

Third, African Christology is not simply a matter of developing titles of Jesus. Rather, African Christology is developing principally as Christology with deep resonances with African religious culture. Schreiter pointed this out clearly when he observed that "African values and customs are often closer to the Semitic values that pervade the Scriptures . . . than the European Christian values that have been imposed upon them."[86] The biblical resonance demonstrated in the titles and their usage renders Christ readily available and easily accessible to the African Christian believer. But the availability and accessibility is not for the African alone, rather it is important for the universal Church.

Fourth, St. Teresa of Avila called on the Church to live more deeply in the person of Jesus by keeping Christ's sacred humanity within their senses. Teresa said that

> The soul can picture itself in the presence of Christ, and accustom itself to become enkindled with great love for His sacred humanity and to have Him ever with it and speak with Him, ask Him for the things it has need of, make complaints to Him of its trials, rejoice with Him in its joys, and yet never allow its

[86] Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, viii.

> joys to make it forgetful of Him. It has no need to think out set prayers but can use just such words as suit its desires and needs.[87]

Teresa's call can serve as a corrective particularly for Christian believers who in their devotional life move quickly from the humanity of Jesus to his divinity without sufficient attention to the practical spiritual implications of his humanity. Reflecting on these African portraits can offer immense benefits not only to the African Christian believer, but also to the Church worldwide. The portraits offer us more concrete means by which to reflect on and study the person of Christ as a man, "bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh" (Gen 2:23) from infancy to manhood, growing from stage to stage, from birth to death, capable of bodily fatigue and hunger, of grief and indignation, depression and exultation of spirit, of hesitation and temptation in life's bewildering choices.

God is a certain kind of personal experience: namely, that unique kind of experience that is the experience of life with Christ or in Christ, the experience of a Christocentric way or mode of life (cf. Gal 2,20).

Fourth, I already pointed out above that the concept of ancestor does not simply describe a role: it describes a life-sustaining relationship between the ancestor and his or her kin. In referring to Jesus as ancestor, from the spiritual perspective my interest is with how Christ is life-giving to a specific people, a community of believers, the Church—his descendants. This spiritual perspective renders the portrait of Jesus as an ancestor particularly useful in Mababu theology. Its usefulness lies in the qualitative impact it has on the way the people experience the mystery of Christ in the chief moments of their life: birth, initiation, starting a family, and death.

These portraits could be detrimental to the life of the Church in Africa. If not presented within a proper catechetical framework, they can appear to compete and compromise

[87] *Collected Works*: *Life*, 12.

Christianity's prophetic vocation unless theologians create points of contact between Christianity and African cultural values that can lead African Christians to a concentrated spiritual aspiration that intensifies their religious commitment. This intensified religious commitment and the daily renewal and nourishing are possible to a large extent in the Eucharist and thus the need for liturgical inculturation.

12.5 Liturgical inculturation

Liturgical celebrations in Africa are generally more vibrant and dynamic than they are in the Western world. The faithful usually dress colorfully; the minister's vestments are usually elaborately decorated to symbolize many African cultural traditional elements. The festive moods that usually characterize typical non-liturgical celebrations in Africa are usually reproduced in some way in the liturgical celebrations.

There are certain features of the typical liturgical celebrations that call our attention to the uniqueness of African liturgical celebration. Chief among them are the elements of musical creativity, rhythmic and energetic participation, elaborate entrance processions, dancing by adults and children, dramatizations of the Scripture readings, morality plays that enhance the (usually extensive) homilies (especially in parish settings), processions of the Word and of the offerings, exuberant gestures spread throughout the celebration, extensive sign of peace-giving, and elaborate thanksgiving dances after communion.

It would be wrong to consider all these rituals and practices of African Christian faithful merely as haphazard engagements that are infused with sentimentalism. Although often they are spontaneous acts, not adequately prepared or sufficiently planned, they tell us about the natural cultural inclination of the African in regard to a fulfilling celebration. They reflect the unique

African culture that becomes a constitutive source of authentic Christian experience. They are rituals which, according to Ronald Grimes, are "performed, embodied, stylized, repetitive, rhythmic, collective, patterned, traditional, deeply felt, condensed, symbolic, dramatic, pragmatic, transcendent, adaptive, and conscious."[88] They demonstrate to us how liturgical celebrations in Africa completely relativize the written word on the pages of the Roman Missal and show very clearly that African sensibilities ordinarily demand a different kind of liturgy from that (seemingly lethargic one) stipulated in the Roman Missal.

Does it not seem appropriate to construe that the liturgical innovation and creativity in Africa could, if presented to the universal Church, touch the yearnings of other churches and perhaps entice the Churches to ask themselves some uncomfortable questions such as the dominant values of their cultures, how meaningful the rituals they perform at liturgy are, and whether or not their liturgical celebrations are fulfilling? Does it not seem logical that the Church in every place and time should celebrate liturgy according to its cultural peculiarity? These questions seem to have been answered by Vatican II in its (1) recognition of the cultural diversity in the Church and (2) the crisis of growth and deep hunger that are some of the signs of the times.[89] The Council favored cultural independence and declared that authentic and full humanity comes to humans only through culture.[90] Therefore the continuing efforts in regard to innovation are sanctioned by Vatican II. Moreover, there is open room for possibilities to adopt liturgical rituals in a manner that is for specific cultures.

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[88] Cited in Margaret Mary Kelleher, "The Liturgical Body: Symbol and Ritual," in *Bodies of Worship: Explorations in Theory and Practice*, ed. Bruce T. Morill (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 53.

[89] Vatican II expressed its recognition of cultural diversity in many of its documents. At this point suffice it to give the example of *Gaudium et spes*, n. 4-10.

[90] *Ad gentes* 22, *Gaudium et spes*, 53.

The achievements and the ongoing efforts in liturgical reforms in Africa could perhaps be offered to the Church worldwide. Lest I sound simplistic, I need to add that the liturgical creativity and innovation in Africa has an organic link to the liturgical movement that began in Europe, which was predominantly led by Benedictine monks. The movement was spearheaded in France by Abbot Prosper Guéranger (1805-1875) and later incorporated into the universal liturgical reforms of Pope Pius X (1835-1914), which become known as the "Liturgical Movement" with his 1903 document on sacred music, "*Tra le Sollecitudini.*"[91] These efforts were authenticated by the Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici* C*orporis* of 1943 with its theological underpinnings for the liturgical movement, which was followed four years later by the encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947).[92]

Léon Ngoy Kalumba tells us that *Mediator Dei* with its call for "active participation" began a decade of theological and liturgical creativity that saw the birth of "the Mass of the Savannahs in Bukina Faso, the fang Mass in Gabon, the *Misa Luba* and *Misa Katanga* in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Creole Mass in Senegal, the Mass of the Boatmen in Congo Brazzaville, and so on."[93]

Uzukwu also highlights five significant developments in Africa since Vatican II: (1) experimentations in vernacular liturgy and promotion of typically African gestures; (2) The Gabba Pastoral Institute established in Uganda in 1969 (and later moved to Kenya in the 1970s) produced new Eucharistic Prayers; (3) establishment of the Association of Member Episcopal Conference of Eastern Africa (AMECEA) which came up with, among other developments,

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[91] Mark Searle et al., eds, *Called to Participate: Theological, Ritual, and Social Perspectives* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 1-14.

[92] William M. Johnston, ed., *Encyclopedia of Monasticism* (Chicago; London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), 772.

[93] Léon Ngoy Kalumba, "The Zairean Rite: The Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire (Congo)," in *Liturgy in the Postmodern World*, ed. Keith Pecklers (London; New York: Continuum, 2003), 94.

Small Christian Communities for the purposes of developing true local Churches; (4) a Cameroonian Mass was practiced at Ndzon-Melen[94]; and (5) the Mass that was composed in (then) Zaïre and used *ad experimentum* until 1988 when approval was granted for it to be recognized as *Roman Rite for the Dioceses of Zaïre* (henceforth *Rite Zaïre*). These scholars tell us that inculturation in Africa has not been merely a form of translation or substitution of texts, placid adaptation to fixed rules and practices

12.5.1 *Rite Zaïrois*

Liturgical renewal in Africa has often been viewed as a development that began after Vatican II. Those who do so look at the Zairean Mass that was approved by Rome as the only success story. To do that is to fail to appreciate the liturgical innovation and creativity that has taken place in Africa. The Christian faith and its institutional expression in the context of Africa began an ambitious journey of liturgical inculturation which culminated with the approval of *Rite Zaïrios* in 1988.[95] *Rite Zaïrois* is popularly known for being dynamic and very animated. One of the observations that scholars have made in regard to *Rite Zaïre* is that cultural groups must

[94] This Mass was devised by two Catholic priests, Fathers Ngumu and Abega, in Cameroon in 1969 based on the cultural model of a reconciliation assembly among the Beti people in Cameroon. The whole celebration was African in flavor and inspiration. It was very far from being a western celebration of the Roman rite, with a few African elements inserted. This was ensured, among other things, by continuous dance and African instrumental and vocal music. See Karl Müller et al (eds), *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 9-17.

[95] There are excellent studies on liturgical inculturation in Africa. Elochukwu Uzukwu offers a good summary in his *Worship as Body Language*. His analysis goes back to the time of the first encounter between Europe and black Africa in the fifteenth century. He notes that from monocultural rigidity that characterized the Church since Constantine and Theodosius (313 and 380 C.E.) the Church addressed itself to its pluricultural spread with the Vatican II. See Elochukwu Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language: Introduction to Christian Worship: An African Orientation* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 26-34.

necessarily enter into the theological process of inculturation if the Church is to be incarnated in the various cultural contexts of worship.[96]

There was a realization that the liturgy celebrated in African churches did not touch the African peoples sufficiently. By 1961 the Episcopal Conference of Congo was already discussing ways of adapting the liturgy to suit the spiritual needs of the people, as Egbulem reports:

> The liturgy introduced in Africa is not yet adapted to the proper character of our populations, and therefore has remained foreign to them. The return to the authentic traditions of the liturgy greatly opens the way to a fundamental adaptation of the liturgy to the African environment. Such an adaptation is very necessary for the edification of the traditional (pagan) community on religious grounds, since worship is the most important element which unites the entire community. Only a living and adapted form of worship can generate the indispensable deepening of the faith which cannot be given through instruction alone. .. An elaborate study and critique of the religious customs as well as a living contact with the people will reveal the fundamental cultural needs, and will furnish the necessary elements for the elaboration of a living African liturgy which is sensitive to the aspirations of the populations.[97]

How is *Rite Zaïre* different from the Roman rite? The rite reflects a combination of the Roman rite and some important elements of African culture beyond Congo where it was originally conceived. A few observations may be highlighted as follows:

1. Entrance procession: The presider vests in the robes and insignia of a chief symbolizing authority. He dances as he processes towards the altar accompanied by the servers and

[96] John Mary Woliggo for example points out that where the opposite is the case, Christianity is weak and simply seeking ways of survival. He asserts that there are 9,000 independent Christian Churches throughout the continent of Africa that broke away from the mission Churches since the close of 19th century because they wanted to incarnate Christianity into the African cultures. See Woliggo et al, *Inculturation*, 21.

[97] Conference Episcopale du Congo, "Apostolat liturgique - Adaptation du Culte," in *Actes de la Vie' Assemblee Pleniere de l'Episcopat de Congo* (Leopoldville: Secretariat General de l'Episcopat, 1961) 362-363, cited in Chris Nwaka Egbulem, *The Power of Afrocentric Celebrations: Inspirations From the Zairean Liturgy* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 33-34.

encircles the altar. Once he reaches the altar, he reverences all four sides with arms outstretched in the *orans* gesture.

2. Altar servers: Carry spears symbolizing the traditional guardians of a chieftain.
3. After listening to the Word of God, its explication (homily), and the publicly uttered words of fidelity to God (*Creed*), the priest leads the assembly into *Kyrie* which is followed immediately by the invocation of the saints and ancestors. The assembly enters into a communion in which the celestial family of God, the saints and ancestors, mediate the mercy and kindness of God.
4. The Penitential Rite is placed after the homily and Creed. During the rite the participants bow down their heads and place their arms on their chests. The rite is concluded with sprinkling of the congregation with holy water and an exchange of peace as a sign of vertical reconciliation with God and communion with the saints and ancestors and horizontal reconciliation of the assembly with each other.
5. During the Prayer of the Faithful, incense is burned to accentuate the sanctification, add a sense of solemnity and mystery to the Mass, and serve as a visual imagery that reminds the liturgical assembly of the transcendence of the Mass which links heaven with earth.
6. At the offertory some members of the assembly dance in a procession towards the altar while carrying (practical) gifts for the needy of the community.
7. The congregation echoes and accompanies the priest's prayers with short responses, and all raise hands with him during his prayers.
8. The Eucharistic Prayer is punctuated by responses of the congregation.

I must bring up two important points from *Rite Zaïrois* that are related to the present study. First, *Rite Zaïrois* underscores the importance of African ancestors as mediators. During

the invocation that is made at the time of *Kyrie* the priest says, "And you, our ancestors, be with us, you who have served God with a right conscience, be with us, we who celebrate the mass at this moment."[98] It is important to note that the assembly does not ask for any material thing from the ancestors but rather seeks to be in communion with them. The desire for communion with the ancestors takes a more explicit and urgent tone at the rite of communion. A tree that symbolizes the presence of the ancestors is placed near the altar. After the singing of the *Agnus Dei* and while the fraction is performed by the priest, two acolytes show the tree to the assembly while the commentator of the liturgy makes the following announcement:

> The tree that you see before you recalls our ancestors; its encounter with Christ bears for us inestimable gifts; it is in these gifts that we want to solidify our communion with our ancestors; the sacrifice of Christ is the definitive cement of our communion in life.[99]

The priest then blesses the tree and asks for the participation of the ancestors in the sacred meal with the assembly. The priest prays thus:

> You our ancestors, we do not forget you in the path that we now take with Jesus, who has brought us a new promise; may this water, which has been consecrated by the cross of Jesus and this glorification, make you grow in heaven and draw you into communion with the fullness of time and that we know in Jesus Christ. Be with us.[100]

The theme of communion that emerges from the *Rite Zaïrois* is a refreshing reminder of the Eucharist in the life of Christian believers. Especially in areas where celebrating the Eucharist is often experienced in a rather perfunctory way, *Rite Zaïrois* is a clarion call for the Christian faithful to go to the Eucharist as the place of enacting and renewing communion with God, with the saints, with one another, and with nature.

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[98] Cited in Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus in Africa*, 41.
[99] Cited in Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus in Africa*, 49.
[100] Cited in Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus in Africa*, 50.

Second, the rituals that are performed in *Rite Zaïrois* illustrate the richness of Africa's culture. They can be best described through the insights of Kelleher as "social, symbolic, and processual action in which meanings and values can be communicated, created, and transformed."[101] Kelleher provides us with a theoretical framework in which we can interpret the rituals and elements of *Rite Zaïrois* as the assembly's means of communicating their history and values as well as structuring, organizing and creatively expressing their lives. Taken together, all the ritual actions constitute a pattern of basic African values and attitudes of a people, which provides order, identity and belonging.

Although Egbulem asks about the way forward for the *Rite Zaïrois*, he does not provide or suggest possible paths for the future of *Rite Zaïrois*. In fact other scholars who have also studied the Mass, such as Léon Ngoy Kalumba, Jules Kipupu Kafuti, Kabasélé Lumbala, and Elochukwu Uzukwu, do not seem to be concerned about the future of *Rite Zaïrois*. Egbolem states rightly that *Rite Zaïrois* is not "meant for export, whether to nearby Burundi or the faraway United States."[102] Egbolem, however, recommends that *Rite Zaïrois* should be used as a point of departure for liturgical inculturation in Africa. It should concern us that since 1988 we have not seen any major liturgical development in Africa as a continuation of *Rite Zaïrois*. There may be numerous challenges that have slowed down the momentum of liturgical renewal that began in early 19th century such as the resources necessary for research and experimentation, the required theological expertise, and ecclesiastical control. I will discuss the latter challenge because of its connection to the other challenges.

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[101] Kelleher, "The Liturgical Body," 54.
[102] Egbulem, *The Power of Afrocentric Celebrations*, 139.

Although the guidelines of carrying out inculturation are stated clearly in the "Fourth Instruction for the Right Application of the Conciliar Constitution on the Liturgy,[103] often there are mixed messages from higher ecclesiastical authorities that dampen the enthusiasm of those leading the task of inculturation.[104] For although Vatican II welcomed "whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse people . . . [as] healed, ennobled and perfected into the glory of God and human happiness" (LG 16), higher ecclesiastical authorities are often perceived to be excessively controlling. Pope John Paul II often reminded the Bishops of their role to safeguard the deposit of faith in its pristine integrity and unity.[105] Pope Benedict XVI has tended to sound a cautious voice towards those engaged in inculturation. Regarding the Missal of Pope Paul VI for example, (then) Cardinal Ratzinger seriously questioned the legitimacy of the reforms. In his preface to Monsignor Klaus Gamber's *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy*, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote:

> What happened after the Council was something else entirely: in the place of liturgy as the fruit of organic development came fabricated liturgy. We abandoned the organic, living process of growth and development over centuries, and replaced it – as in a manufactured process – with a fabrication, a banal on-the-spot product.[106]

Could it be that too rigid a control and supervision of higher ecclesial authorities is an obstacle to creativity and makes liturgical acts instruments of standardization and centralization? Uzukwu

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[103] Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments on March 29, 1994

[104] Many critics have observed that in the 21st century this control has been largely regained by the draconian rules of translation and vetting by the Congregation for the Administration of the Sacraments, and the rules contained in *Liturgiam Authenticam* and its application, the *ratio translationis*.

[105] Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* 54 (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1991), 38.

[106] Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Preface" (printed on the back cover of the English translation) of Klaus Gamber, *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy: Its Problems and Background*, trans. Klaus D. Grimm (San Juan Capistrano, C.A.: Una Voce Press; Harrison, N.Y.: Foundation for Catholic Reform, 1993). One wonders what happens to the local Church. For *Lumen Gentium* states that "This Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of believers, which, united with their pastors, are themselves called Churches in the New Testament. For in their own locality these are the new people called by God."(n 26).

suggests that there is need to engage with ecclesiastical authorities who are responsible for the directives of liturgical laws in order to establish the basis in canonical legislation clearly and interpret ecclesiastical disciplines in a manner that facilitates the advancement of local churches.[107] Uzukwu concludes that

> At the back of the minds of some church leaders is the phobia of letting through heretical beliefs, adopting of superstitious practices and the possibility of deviating from sound Catholic theology and healthy ecclesiastical tradition, in the name of *Inculturation.* Consequently, many leaders, specifically clerics, prefer to remain on the surer and safer ground of mere adaptations and accommodations.[108]

It should be remembered that although ultimate decisions that impact the Church rest with the Apostolic See, a new spirit of devolution should be encouraged. For it has also been sanctioned that the powers of planning, experimentation and decision be left to episcopal conferences, regional episcopal meeting and individual bishops, who are encouraged to set up commissions competent to study and guide matters that pertain to inculturation. When the role of the Apostolic See is considered primarily as providing spiritual and pastoral guidance that can fulfill the cultural and religious aspirations of the Christian faithful, then that role will definitely help the advancement of the Church in Africa in its efforts to inculturation.

A final point can be made about the great value of African ancestor veneration within the context of the Eucharist. Shorter reminds us that that the dead are not only not forgotten but actually continue to play a role in the whole community:[109]

> People in Africa live and communicate with their dead. This communion of the living and dead, once it is transformed by faith in the risen Christ and the power of his resurrection, can, I believe, give new and vital expression to the doctrine of the communion of saints.[110]

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[107] Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 38.
[108] Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language*, 38.
[109] Shorter, "Ancestor Veneration Revisited," *African Ecclesial Review* 25, no. 4 (1983): 202.
[110] Shorter, "Ancestor Veneration Revisited," 202.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

On the one hand, Christianity in Africa is old if we trace its beginnings in Egypt around the middle of the first century until the beginning of the Middle Ages.[1] On the other hand, Christianity is new when we consider the modern phase of missionary activities that began in the fifteenth century. Since the beginning of the missionary evangelization, the Catholic Church, especially, has directed its missionary efforts in Africa to the preaching of the Gospel to people who hear it from their various cultural perspectives, some for the first time.

In spite of being a relatively young Church, the Church in Africa shows signs of strength. While in some respects the Western Church is struggling to remain strong in the midst of an increasingly secular culture, there seems to be a dynamism and vibrancy in African church life that shows a lot of promise for a stable Christian future in Africa. It is a phenomenon that leads Lamin Sanneh to observe that "the irruption of Christian forces in contemporary Africa is without parallel in the history of the church."[2]

Such dynamism and vibrancy must be supported by solid theology that can withstand the harsh effects of acculturation and globalization. The task of supporting and building a solid theology in Africa requires scholars to translate Christianity into authentic African categories, as has been recognized both within and outside Africa. That task further requires scholars to theologize from an African perspective and to share some of the most important spiritual and

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[1] Many observers believe that Christianity in the continent of Africa dates back to the beginnings of Christianity itself. Eusebius of Caesarea, for example, asserts that Saint Mark the Apostle first came to Egypt to evangelize between the first and third year of the reign of Emperor Claudius, which would make it sometime between AD 41 and 44. See C. F. Crusé, *The ecclesiastical history of Eusebius Pamphilus* (London: G. Bell and sons, 1897), 7-45. Many scholars agree that the size of and influence of Christianity in North Africa was reduced by the spread of Islam into North Africa. Elizabeth Isichei, for example, tells us that Christianity in Maghrib virtually disappeared by the eleventh century, although it survived in some indigenized forms in the Coptic Church in Egypt and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (London: Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1995), 45-73.

[2] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 188.

theological riches of Africa with the rest of the world. The overall aim of the present study has been an attempt to chart a path for a strong future for African Christianity by examining the relationship between *communio sanctorum* and African ancestors.

With regard to my examination of *communio sanctorum* in the first part of this study, I wish to note two major findings from that by way of conclusion. First, I highlighted two models that some scholars have advanced to express the relationship between Christian believers and saints. The models view saints as (1) companions and (2) intercessors. I saw a need for yet another model, which I called "a family model," that can accommodate an important African cultural trait which is one of their cherished religious values. Second, I examined the origins of the expression "Communion of Saints." I examined some important secondary sources and found that although the origins of the expression were ambiguous; the ambiguity seems to have been resolved when two interpretations were applied concurrently: namely, communion of holy people – masculine, and communion of holy things – neuter. I wish to make two proposals which I posed as questions at the end of the first part. First, the seeming exclusivity that characterizes the interpretation of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints reduces the Church's capacity to enter into dialogue with non-Western cultures and Christian tradition. If the Church is understood as a "family" of God, this could serve to encompass even African ancestors as integral members of the family of God. Second, the advance in modern social sciences should further an understanding that Western culture (that man-made construct in which *sanctorum communio* was embedded) must recognize non-Western cultures in order that they may more effectively share in Christ's saving acts without having to relinquish their cultural heritage. From these findings, it may be deduced that there are similarities between African ancestral traditions and *communio sanctorum*: just as the Christian saints are integral to Christian life and worship,

the African ancestors are integral to the traditional African social and religious structure. The analogy entailed a critical examination of African cultures, which I began by looking at the Luo funeral rituals in the second part of the study.

The examination of the Luo funeral rituals was an important study that provided me with a concise description of the religiosity of the Luo, their concept of God, their spiritual worldview, and their appropriation of Christianity. As regards Luo appropriation of Christianity, I believe a brief comment about the significance of Legio Maria Church is in order. Legio's attempt to amalgamate the Catholic and Luo religious traditions is clearly a modest one in order to establish a contextualized and authentically homegrown version of Catholicism which has been duplicated in many other thriving AICs. Legio demonstrates (1) a paradoxical hybridity that reflects the Luo's capacity for adaptive use of Christian forms and ideas to reframe the Christian faith within their own cultural genius, and (2) that the overarching reason for their quest for independence may be viewed as the desire of some African Christians to express themselves as a local Church in Africa. Legio therefore highlights the need for a thoroughgoing study of inculturation and other contextual theologies.

The necessity for inculturation ought to be preceded by the study of culture. From the study of the analytical procedures and interpretation of culture developed by renowned social scientists in this study, I came to a better understanding of Luo funeral rituals. That understanding led me to appreciate further the significance of religious ritual activities, for example in:

- the expression of human emotions as they come to terms with the major events of life
- the deepening of spiritual insights

- the instillation of religious values and attitudes in both the lives of the community and of the individuals
- the expression of solidarity
- making visible their most basic religious needs, values and aspirations.

The study of Luo funeral rituals and other pertinent African cultures in this monograph also led to an important conclusion: African ancestors hold a special place in the religious cosmos of the African. The ongoing efforts in Christian evangelization must address the Africans' fear that ancestors may act independently of God, sometimes even in a capricious manner. Furthermore, the study of inculturation must be deep and wide enough to weave the ancestral beliefs and practices into the ordinary life of the African Christian believer.

The depth and breadth of inculturation can perhaps be highlighted against the backdrop of other similar theological concepts, namely, contextualization and local theology that this study tried to dwell on. In mission literature, the terms contextualization, local theology, and inculturation are often used synonymously by various scholars, although they carry different nuances. Their immense value lies in their usefulness in resolving the differences between Christianity and African traditional religions and cultures. These two entities have often been portrayed as competing systems of values that are diametrically opposed to each other. For an African, becoming a Christian often means giving up certain traditional beliefs, both good and those deemed to be inappropriate by the emissaries of Christianity. This study found that a number of scholars are beginning to take a more nuanced view. Such scholars assert that dialogue with non-Christian religions ought to include syncretism and hybridity in order to manage the differing, but complementary aspects of local Christian traditions and cultures. This study concludes that through syncretism and hybridity, the intermingling and fusion that results

in a transformation of Christian tradition and African cultural beliefs and practices does not have a pejorative meaning. Rather, it is a process that encourages the development of African culture by forming a new cultural identity and intercultural semiotics.

One of the most important findings in this study is that what is commonly known as "African Theology" still needs to be developed so that African Christians may have a living experience of God in their lives that is deep and according to their genius. In connection with that discovery, this study considered two challenges that must be addressed. First, there is a need to develop an analytical framework on which the ancestral beliefs and practices that are embedded in Africa's history can be affirmed. Second, there is a need to recognize disenchantment with the early missionary activity in Africa, especially insofar as it failed to recognize the immense value of African traditional cultures. Against the backdrop of these two main challenges I proposed *Mababu theology* as a way forward for the development of ancestral theology in Africa. Since "Mababu theology" is my coinage that has appeared for the first time in this study, a few final words are in order by way of clarification.

Mababu theology is born out of the understanding that African traditional religion is the heritage into which African peoples are born, live and die. African religious beliefs and practices are not a set of principles and values that were simply added on to their lives by their tradition. Rather, they are the sustaining elements of faith that were held by their ancestors and handed down to them in various forms and intensities for generations. Six main points may summarize such beliefs and practices:

1. African religious beliefs and practices are implicit in the rituals that they perform in daily lives; African people's religious sensibility does not dichotomize between the material and spiritual world.

2. The cultural uniformities and resemblances among the various African ancestral beliefs and practice systems are also the important cultural values that consistently define the African beliefs and practices, personality, and history.
3. African beliefs and practices are elements of the theological, cultural, ethical, moral, and sociological considerations that provide us with complementary insights into the contextual issues that can constitute a local theology of ancestors.
4. The innate religious sense of the African people which survived the experience of colonialism, Western Christianity, and globalization demonstrates the deep rootedness of African spirituality to its solid historical past.
5. Since cultures change over a period of time, there is need to continuously affirm the positive elements of Africa's cultural past, whose emphasis can be seen to encourage the wholeness of life and how that life is expressed, for example, in an individual's connectedness to the larger society, communal living, and environmental stewardship.
6. As African Christian believers continue to seek ways to embody their beliefs, customs, and patterns of Church in their worship, it is also important that they seek ways of making a contribution to the universal Church drawing from their rich cultural heritage.

Mababu theology is not simply "ancestor theology." Rather, it is an eclectic conceptual platform on which the various African ancestral beliefs and practices and their consequences to the African Christians can be analyzed. It is a paradigm for construing the veneration of African ancestors and its value in theological discourse. If Mababu theology can succeed in these ways, then it can make a claim to be an innovative theology, consistent with the need for local theologies in Africa and the growth and change in the Church's development, especially since the Second Vatican Council.

The past few years have seen the emergence of certain contextualized or viewpoint theologies, such as liberation theology, postcolonial theology, and reconstruction theology. These theologies emerged in response to felt needs in the contexts in which they were conceived, especially in the so-called developing world. Mababu theology bears some resemblance with them insofar as it is a theoretical tool for challenge and change, for deconstruction and reconstruction. It essentially implies an interpretation of theology from an African ancestral point of view—a view that was for generations ignored or misunderstood. Mababu theology does not seek to simply offer information regarding African ancestral traditions. Rather, Mababu theology offers an opportunity for critical thinking and knowledge from an African-centered standpoint.

As a contextual theology, Mababu theology must distinguish itself as a conceptual framework for the articulation of a semiotics of African culture, and as a tool for analyzing how African peoples can live with their ancestors, especially soon after they begin performing their funeral rites. At the same time, Mababu theology must promote an understanding of African ancestors as important pillars of the society who, upon joining the ancestral community, acquire new and more powerful forms of existence, thus living close to their descendants while at the same time being capable of mediating for them in the courts of God. The African ancestors are therefore viewed as paradigmatic figures whose lives embody African central values of faith in a strikingly concrete form. This is the sense in which African ancestors may be considered as equal partners in dialogue with *communio sanctorum*. Moreover, this study found Temple's concept of *vital force* as a helpful African indigenous concept, not only as a metaphor for expressing the fullness of life that issues from the mystical bond of communion that unites the living, the living-dead, and God, but also for understanding the spiritual suppositions behind African people's beliefs in magic, witchcraft, divination and other spiritual and cultural influences that cause fear.

One of the persistent problems in African missiology that this study pointed out is how to adapt expressions of the Christian faith to the religious and cultural attitudes of new and old Christians without compromising the essence of the Gospel or stifling or hindering the development of African cultures. I highlighted the problem that was prevalent, especially in early Western Christianity and with some scholars: the misunderstanding of the cult of African ancestors, portrayed as the "worship of ancestors" rather than a "veneration of ancestors," therefore making it an idolatrous, and implicitly demonic, practice. I argued that the cult of the ancestors does not contradict *communio sanctorum*, but rather complements it. Because of the religious antecedent of their ancestors, African Christians are in a good position to live graced lives with their beloved dead, and with the saints in Jesus by combining both the cult of ancestors and the *communio sanctorum*. My findings led me further to conclude that African ancestral veneration is not just a path through which African Christian believers can conceptualize *communio sanctorum* but also has broader spiritual implications and theological perspectives that, if developed, can benefit the universal Church.

I concluded the study with an observation that several theologians have made, namely, that perhaps the time is right for the African Church to make a theological contribution to the universal Church. In line with that observation I suggested three main ways by which the rich African cultural heritage could be shared with the universal Church. First, African people's concern with culture and cultural expression could help to promote cultural diversity so that there may be an ever-expanding awareness of the role of the Gospel, church, and culture. Second, the performance of ancestral rituals fosters unity and encourages reconciliation, which can go a long way in addressing the problem of human alienation. Third, African people's approach to health and wholeness is unique because, for them, well-being is reached when an individual has

achieved harmony among nature, persons, ancestors, and the unseen. The individual and these elements are then considered to be bound together in a cosmic oneness.

Furthermore, Mababu theology can be helpful to the universal Church in four specific ways. First, it can help promote the image of the Church as family of God by focusing on communal living, which is one of the most important and deeply rooted convictions of the African peoples. Second, it can promote a greater understanding of the Trinity by making the Trinity logically coherent through the application of concepts that appeal to a given people's spiritual sensibilities, thus making the doctrine culturally intelligible in the indigenous faith of people in places in which Christianity has been planted. Third, Mababu theology can help promote a greater understanding of Jesus as a unique (or special) ancestor so that peoples of various cultures and localities can discover the true face of Jesus Christ, thus allowing for a living experience of that face, in depth and according to their genius. Fourth, Mababu theology may help promote liturgical renewal and inculturation by highlighting the importance of continuing the liturgical movement that began in Europe in the early 19th century and that brought some measure of success in some regions; for example, the liturgical renewal in Africa which culminated in the approval of the Zairean Mass in 1988. (The Zairean Mass has parts in which ancestors, ancestral beliefs and practices feature very prominently.) This example of the African's highest point of worship shows the great value of ancestor veneration within the context of the Eucharist and highlights the truth that not only are the dead not forgotten, but they actually continue to play an important role in the entire community.

A comment about the future of African theology is in order at this point. Christianity's explosive growth and promising future in Africa, which has been widely reported by many, must

be accompanied by a solid and sound theology. The challenges of wars, diseases, refugees, and poverty in Africa are well known. Afful Ebbuley laments Africa's dismal situation thus:

> The current African situation, beset by conflicts and violence, is drawing attention all over the world. It is no good news! It is turmoil, communal conflict and violence, hatred and malicious actions towards ethnic groups in the same nation-State. There are institutionalized divisions, deep-rooted enmity between ethnic groups, religious sects and belief-systems. These have flared up in conflagration which is wreaking havoc on innocent lives, sowing death and destruction on citizens and bringing economic ruin. Millions of people have fled and continue to flee their homes across national borders. Mass immigration has resulted in overcrowded and cholera-ridden refugee camps where people die pathetically from apocalyptic diseases and plagues. Most of these are fleeing wars and government repression.[3]

Ebbuley's lament is a reminder to us that the Church still has a long way to go in accomplishing its mission with, and for, the people in Africa. Moreover, in the living out of authentic Christian life, it would be a great shame if a visitor returned from Africa and reported that

> Old beliefs and customs did not die out . . . Public marriage ceremonies were held in the Church and then the people returned to their homes to celebrate the weddings in private. Amulets were hidden under shirts, and new Christians did not admit to missionary doctors that they were also going to the village *Ng'anga* (witchdoctor) . . . tribal differences were denied in public although Christians continued to marry their children along tribal lines.[4]

If Christian theology is to be at the service of the church in Africa, then two important and related tasks that have been dealt with in this study must be reiterated. First, theologians must face the challenge of integrating Christianity into the African people's worldview so that Africans re-discover the richness of their cultural values and traditions. This was expressed insightfully by Kwame Nkrumah at the first conference of Independent African States in Accra, Ghana. Nkrumah asserted, "In the last century, the Europeans discovered Africa. In the next

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[3] Afful Ebbuley, "Violence and State Security in Africa – A Sociological Analysis," *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* 7, no 1-2 (1995): 5.

[4] Felix Muchimba, *Liberating the African Soul: Comparing Africa and Western Christian Music and Worship Styles* (Colorado Springs, CO; Milton Keynes, UK; Hyderabad, India: Authentic, 2007), 19-20.

century, the Africans will rediscover Africa."[5] African believers must *discover* their whole lives within Christianity without having to hide integral aspects of themselves from the public life of the Church. Second, theologians must work towards developing African contextual theologies to help Christian believers live that theology in a way that is congenial to the African people's view of reality.

Africa, largely evangelized by the West, still struggles with a dependency on the Western theological and spiritual approaches to the living of the faith in order to define its own theological, spiritual, and ecclesiological identity. If it has to be a community of faith that is rooted in the Christian tradition without losing its African traditional cultural worldview, then there is an urgent need to find ways of engagement between Christianity and African cultures. Failure to do this could result in the African Church emerging as a subculture of the West, not only in its doctrines, but also in its way of worship and identity as a Church.

The issue I have addressed regarding the tension between *communio sanctorum* and the veneration of African ancestors is both timely and timeless. All human beings, at some point in their lives, must confront the question about the destiny which awaits them. I do not claim to have exhausted all aspects of the issue. Rather, it is my hope that I have laid a small foundation on which others may build. I hope that I have brought to light some of the richness of African spirituality and cosmology as regards spiritual theology, revealing how this African spiritual tradition can enrich communities, scholars and professionals who seek to engage in culturally rooted and sensitive theologies.

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[5]Cited in David Wesley Ofumbi, *Identity and Transformation: The Significance of African Christianity in Community Transformation* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2012), 81.

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