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THE UNDERSTANDING OF ANCESTRAL VENERATION AMONG THE AFRICAN AND VIETNAMESE PEOPLE AND THE ATTEMPTS TO RECONCILE ANCESTRAL VENERATION WITH CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract

The cult of ancestors plays a significant role in the lives of African and Vietnamese people. The practice of ancestral veneration was one of the most controversial issues for early Christian missionaries especially in Africa and Asia. This article will argue that both the Africans and Vietnamese do not worship their ancestors. Both the Africans and Vietnamese recognize the existence of one God as the transcendental Being who is the subject of worship. Ancestral rituals and practices show the sense of community, solidarity, communion and fidelity with departed members. On the contrary, the ancestor cults in these places focus on remembering, honouring and loving their “living” dead or ancestors. Moreover, this paper will show how the indigenous Christian Churches in Africa and Vietnam find ways to reconcile their traditional concepts of ancestors with the message of Gospels. Finally, some lessons from the way African theologians are doing theology in their context could be used for doing theology in the Vietnamese context.

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Introduction

Christianity is a world religion, but in each culture, the local Christian community has its own distinctive features and characteristics. In other words, whenever the Christian message spreads to a new place, there is the process of contextualization in order to make the message of the Gospels take root in a particular context with its own social, cultural, and religious practices and beliefs. One of the most controversial issues for early Christian missionaries in Asia and Africa was the religious practice of venerating ancestors or the “living dead.” The missionaries usually were divided into two lines of thought about this practice. One group could see this ritual and practice toward ancestors not as false worship but as an act of venerating and honouring the deceased, while the other group condemned it as an act of idolatry, superstition, heresy; something that needed to be cleaned out.

This article shows that the rites of ancestor veneration is not a contradiction to the first commandment as understood by many western missionaries. On the contrary, the ancestor cults in these places focus on remembering, venerating, honouring and loving their departed ones. Moreover, the article describes the ways in which African and Vietnamese Churches have tried to integrate ancestor veneration into the Christian faith. The article begins by examining the understanding of ancestors according to the African and Vietnamese perspective. It then goes to explore the practice of ancestral cults among the African and Vietnamese people. Finally, it will deal with the ways indigenous Christians in Africa and Vietnam reconcile and incorporate traditional concepts concerning ancestors with the Christian message.

1. Ancestors and the Role of Ancestors from the Perspective of African and Vietnamese Cultures

1.1. African Understanding of Ancestors

1.1.1. *The African Worldview*

Unity is the keynote of the African world. For the traditional African, the whole universe is unified and integrated with each part contributing to the other. Life is experienced to the full as each person is interconnected with all the elements of the universe. According to Africans, the universe incorporates not only spiritual beings such as

God, divinities, or spirits but also the mystical powers resident in animals, plants and inanimate objects with human beings in the centre. All these elements are blended together in a unified universe. Mbiti gives a typology of an African understanding of reality as consisting of the physical and spiritual:

Africans have their own ontology ... I propose to divide it up into five categories, but it is an extremely anthropocentric ontology in the sense that everything is seen in terms of its relation to man. These categories are:

1. God as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things.
2. Spirit being made up of superhuman being and the spirits of men who died a long time ago.
3. Man including human beings who are alive and those about to be born.
4. Animals and plants, or the remainder of biological life.
5. Phenomena and objects without biological life.

Expressed anthropocentrically, God is the Originator and Sustainer of man; the Spirits explain the destiny of man; Man is the centre of this ontology; environment in which man lives, provide a means of existence and, if need to be, man establishes a mystical relationship with them.¹

Because the African worldview is anthropocentric, human beings are at the centre of the universe. The whole emphasis is upon human beings gaining the power needed to live a good life. According to Mbiti, "Man is at the very centre of existence and African people see everything else in its relation to this central position of man... it is as if God exists for the sake of man."² In agreement with Mbiti, E.I. Metuh asserts, "Everything else in African worldview seems to get its bearing and significance from the position, meaning and end of man."³

African beliefs can be very complex and the African communities vary greatly in how they understand the composite elements of a person. However, there are some common agreements about the material and nonmaterial substances of human nature. Omosae Awolalu claims that "Africans believe that man's nature is partly material and partly immaterial. He is composed of body which is tangible, concrete and measurable... as well as the immaterial entity which is immeasurable and intangible."⁴ The external and internal

¹John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: SPCK, 1969, 20.

²Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 92.

³E.I. Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation*, Onitsha Nigeria: IMICO, 1991, 109.

⁴J. Omosae Awolalu, "The African Traditional View of Man," *Orita* I, 2 (December 1972) 101.

parts of a person are mutually interdependent. When a person is alive, the physical body is filled with energy, a life-force, a vital principle.⁵ According to the African people's belief, Benézet Bujo states, "not only human beings influence each other, but all forces possess a causal and ontological interdependence. Accordingly, ... forces can influence men and women ontologically and vice versa."⁶ This is the basis of the practice of venerating "ancestors" who are regarded as the "living dead" and still have an influence on the living ones.

1.1.2. Ancestors as the Living Dead in Africa

Generally, ancestors are believed to be those who have died but continue to exist in the spiritual world, and are believed to continue to influence the living. They are called the living-dead, a concept first used by Mbiti and other scholars to describe their presence with the living and their state of personal immortality in the spirit world. He states that "the living dead is a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him in his life, as well as being alive in the world of the spirits. The living dead are still part of the extended family and as such has a close relationship with the living."⁷

An ancestor is not just any member of a family who has passed away. There are certain conditions for a person to be honoured and celebrated. First of all, to be an ancestor, one must have lived a long life which assumes marriage and procreation rather than dying simply from old age. Bujo claims, "To be one of the ancestors, it is also necessary to have been married, been blessed with children, to have lived long, and not to have a violent death."⁸ Therefore, there must be a consanguineous *kinship* between the ancestor with one's earthly kin. Secondly, one has *superhuman sacred status* which is usually acquired through death and that can be beneficial to his earthly relative.⁹ Thirdly, one must have led an *exemplary* life, demonstrating good characters and behaviour according to traditional morality. Bujo states, "A virtuous life and heroic deeds are so stressed that some of the other preconditions could be left

⁵Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, Illinois: Oasis International Ltd., 2012, 57.

⁶Benézet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998, 16.

⁷Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 25.

⁸Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 16.

⁹Charles Nyamiti, *Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of Humankind: An Essay on African Christology*, Kenya: CUEA Publication, 2006, 3.

out.”¹⁰ Fourthly, because of their super human sacred condition, they play a *mediatory role* between the Supreme Being and their living relatives. And finally, these conditions must be accompanied by a befitting burial and be revered in specific places and *ceremonies*.

1.1.3. Roles of Ancestors

In Africa, the living dead are part of the reality of life and often visit their family members in their dreams, in concrete creatures such as snakes, butterflies, etc., or through direct contact with the living through possession.¹¹ According to Mbiti, “The living dead are deeply concerned with family affairs.”¹² Everything that concerns the living family, its health and fertility is of interest of the ancestors, since they are its elders. In turn, the living family or clan members expect their ancestors to protect them from sickness, death and other disasters and grant them material prosperity, long life and many children for the perpetuity of the lineage.¹³ Mbiti describes this belief: “They know and have interest in what is going on in their family... They are guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities. Offence in these matters is ultimately an offence against the forefathers who, in that capacity act as invisible police of the families and communities.”¹⁴

Since ancestors are custodians of traditional laws and customs on which the survival of the community depends, they normally would punish anybody who flouts them. Offences committed against their orders result in punishment coming from the anger of the ancestors, such as misfortune, illness and death.

Moreover, the living dead are believed to play an essential role in the relationship of the community with the Supreme Being. They act as mediators and intermediaries because “They are the closest links that men have with the spirit world.”¹⁵ Because of this status, ancestors serve as intermediaries to the Supreme Being as a part of the long chain of “intercessors whose ultimate function is to intercede on behalf of humankind.”¹⁶ They can invoke wrath or blessing on

¹⁰Nyamiti, *Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of Humankind*, 16.

¹¹Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*, Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984, 9.

¹²Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 85.

¹³Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 139.

¹⁴Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 83.

¹⁵Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 82.

¹⁶James Amanze, *African Traditional Religions and Culture in Botswana: A Comprehensive Textbook*, Gaborone: Pula Press, 2002, 65.

God's behalf, so they are also believed to convey messages from God back to the living through them.

Besides their role as mediators, the living dead are believed to have power to give the living welfare as well as wrath. They have powers beyond human control, such as ability to bring rain or to protect cattle and crops. Their responsibility is to procure benefits for their living communities such as health, long life, good harvest and begetting of children. They can bring wrath to warn people who have gotten into a wrong path. They can cause calamity to their descendants especially when their instructions are not carried out. Amanze explains:

The most significant element in their interaction with the world of the living is that they are ever concerned with the well-being of their descendants, and any breach of traditional customs is viewed as an offence against them. They have the power of displaying their wrath upon those who break the laws of the family and neglect their ancestors.¹⁷

This power causes fear and hope in the descendants. The practice of ancestor veneration is, therefore, to deal with the power, by appeasing or influencing the ancestors. This function is also present in Asian understandings of ancestors. There, too, it is believed that the soul of the dead may cause harm or fortune to the living.

2. Vietnamese Understanding of Ancestors

Ancestral veneration also plays a significant role in the life of the Vietnamese. It is an integral part of Vietnamese culture that is extremely popular among Vietnamese people. In fact, all Vietnamese, regardless of his or her religious reference, if asked, would confess that they believe in Heaven and practice ancestral veneration.

2.1. The Vietnamese's Worldview

It is very difficult to describe the Vietnamese worldview precisely because Vietnam does not have its own literary and philosophical canon. It is expressed primarily in oral folksongs, proverbs, poetry, myths, legends, in ethical and religious practices. According to Peter Phan, an American-Vietnamese theologian, the most suitable word to describe the Vietnamese worldview is harmony. The Vietnamese word for harmony is "*hoà hợp*" which

¹⁷Amanze, *African Traditional Religions and Culture in Botswana*, 63.

means joining together peacefully or peaceful union.¹⁸ Harmony is not something that just happens, but it is something that one needs to work hard to bring about. It is something created out of many diverse and potentially conflictive elements. This harmony must be achieved at three levels: Heaven (*Thien* or *Troi*), Earth (*Dia*), and Humanity (*Nhan*.) According to this principle, which commonly is called the three-element philosophy, these elements constitute the whole of reality.¹⁹ Heaven refers to God or the Supreme Being who is transcendent, omnipotent and eternal. Besides God as Supreme Being, there are gods who are associated with natural phenomena such as oceans, fires, rains, lightning, etc. Earth refers to the material reality which give rise to entities composed of the five agents of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. Humanity refers to human beings who are the link or union between Heaven and Earth. Human beings need to work to bring the harmony by orienting upward to Heaven through knowing Heaven and acting out the will of Heaven, and by orienting downward to Earth through using material things for the benefit of all. According to this three-element philosophy, all these elements are mutually dependent. Heaven without Earth and Humanity cannot bring forth anything. Earth without Heaven and Humanity would be a chaotic desert, and Humanity without Heaven and Earth would be directionless and there would be nowhere to exist. Heaven gives birth, earth nurtures, and humanity harmonizes. Consequently, to be successful and virtuous, all human actions must be governed by these principles, carried out in accord with Heaven's will, with the propitious favour of Earth, and for the harmony of humanity.²⁰

The principle of harmony in the three-element philosophy is enforced by the Confucian tradition that was introduced to Vietnam during nearly one thousand years (111 BC–AD 939) of Chinese domination. In order to achieve harmony, one has to know the will of Heaven, and since Heaven acts in history, one can discover Heaven's will by studying the past embodied in traditions, rites, and literature. Besides that, one must know one's position and responsibility in the family and in society so that one can achieve human perfection. Therefore, one must follow the established codes of behaviour, which includes reverence for one's ancestors.

¹⁸Peter Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics*, New York: Paulist Press, 2005, 24.

¹⁹Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics*, 25.

²⁰Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics*, 27.

Quoc Anh Tran,²¹ an American-Vietnamese theologian, rightly asserts that Vietnamese people believe that the human person is made of material and immaterial components. The material components (*Xac*) are flesh, bone and vital organs. These material parts cannot function without nonmaterial substances as the driving force or vital energy. Immaterial substances are composed of a pair of souls called *Hon* (spiritual soul) and *Via* (material soul.) The spiritual souls come from heaven and enter the body at birth while the material souls are from earth during the development of the foetus. When a person dies, the spiritual souls ascend to heaven, and the material souls come back to the earth.

2.2. Vietnamese Ancestors²²

The Vietnamese believe that death is not the end of a person's existence but rather one's transformation into a privileged place in the family hierarchy. Unlike Africans, the Vietnamese believe that *all* deceased members are treated as ancestors, regardless of the merits acquired or transgressions committed during their lifetime, and become spiritual members of the family and can influence the material world.²³ They continue to concern the interests of their living relatives and have ability to affect their living members. After death, the deceased goes to another world called "the palace of death." In "the palace of death," the deceased continue to engage in similar activities which are similar to the world of the living. They still need "material" assistance such as shelter, food, drink, money, clothing. When they do not receive what they need, they will return to disturb the living. Therefore, the relationship between the living and ancestors is interdependent. All members of the family are mutually interdependent with duties and obligation whether they are alive or dead. Parents care and provide for all needs of their children in their infancy and youth. When parents get old, their children have the obligation to provide all needed supports. This obligation extends to the dead in the cult of ancestors. Children must make offerings to their ancestral spirits. Ritual sacrifices are performed to provide the ancestor with food, drink, shelter and all needed sustenance.

Like Africans, the Vietnamese believe that ancestors have power to affect the living either positively or negatively. On the positive side,

²¹Anh Q. Tran, *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors: An Interreligious Encounter in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam: Errors of the Three Religions*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 111-12.

²²Tran, *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors*, 108-111.

²³Tran, *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors*, 109.

ancestors can cure illness, avert disaster, promote well-being or bless fertility. By providing good fortune, giving advice, the ancestors assist the family members in their struggle. Hence, the ancestors function as a protector of the family where there is a serious threat. They also can be mediators on behalf of their family to the higher deities or to the Supreme God. On the negative side, they can cause illness or trouble when their children offend them or violate family rules.

3. Ancestral Veneration or Worship?

3.1. Ancestral Worship and Conflict with Christianity

Both in Africa and Vietnam, the cult of ancestor veneration was a controversial issue when the early Christian missionaries arrived. In both places, ancestral veneration used to be regarded as a superstition and something that needed to be cleaned out.

James Ngugi, a Kenyan scholar, articulated what many perceived to be the consequence of becoming a Christian:

Accepting the Christian Church meant the outright rejection of all the African customs. It meant the rejection of those values and rituals that held us together... 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.²⁴

The attitudes of the European missionaries toward cult of ancestor were suspicious, as they considered the cult to be superstitious beliefs and the work of the devil. In South Africa, the cult of ancestor among Shona people “were regarded as a superstition by missionaries and the ancestor cult was simply equated with witchcraft.”²⁵ This attitude was not simply an isolated case but it was the attitude that characterized how the missionaries viewed the natives and their cultures. B.E. Kipkorir states, “The missionaries were uncompromising in their rejection of African rites and rituals of any sort” because they “associated the outer symbols of rites and rituals with barbarism and paganism.”²⁶ Even until the late nineteenth century, this negative attitude still remained in Africa. According to Makwasha,

²⁴James Ngugi, “The Church: A Pawn of Capitalism?” in *Présence* 4 (1971) 54.

²⁵W.R. Peadar, *Missionary Attitudes to Shona Culture 1890-1923*, Harare: Local Series Pamphlet, 1970, 3, cited by Makwasha, 125.

²⁶B. Kipkorir, “Descent From Cherang’any Hills: Memoirs of a Reluctant Academic,” in *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 11, 2 (2010) 20.

“Zimbabwean bishops ...followed the footsteps of George Knight-Bruce and Bernard Mizeki in attacking the ancestor cult as the work of the devil.”²⁷

In Vietnam, except in some cases of Jesuit missionaries, the case was quite the same as with missionaries of the French MEPs and the Spanish Dominicans whose members became apostolic vicars in Vietnam. They believed that the traditional form of ancestor worship was idolatrous because it resembled the worship of spirits. As a result, Vietnamese Catholics were not allowed to practice what was most sacred in their cultures and most Vietnamese became hostile to Christianity. During the persecution of Vietnamese Catholics in the nineteenth century, there was a slogan to rally the people “*Binh Tay Sat Ta*” which literally means: destroy the West and kill the evil religion. Christianity was viewed as evil because it forbade ancestor veneration.²⁸ The persecution was bloody and severe when Confucian monarchists believed:

Since Christianity came to Vietnam, with its doctrine of praising the Lord of the universe, and saints, many ignorant people of ours have ignorantly joined them, and neglected in fulfilling their duties as children in the family as well as citizens in the nation... These people have destroyed the framework of morality, causing a chaotic situation all over the country... Where is the root of these troubles if it is not because of the Christians?²⁹

In the middle of seventeenth century, many foreign missionaries were expelled from Vietnam at the same time. It is estimated that 130,000 Catholics were killed during the last four decades of nineteenth century.

But did Africans and Vietnamese worship or venerate ancestors? According to the *Advanced Oxford American Dictionary*, to venerate is “to have and show a lot of respect for somebody/something, especially somebody/something that is considered to be holy or very important.”³⁰ Therefore, it means reverence, admiration and awe. It can be seen as an act of worship; however, it is done or given to saints in contradiction of worship given to God alone.³¹ On the other hand,

²⁷Gift Makwasha, *Not Without My Ancestors: A Christological Case Study of the Shona Ancestor cult of Zimbabwe*, ThD dissertation in Boston University, 2009, 6.

²⁸Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholic*, 52.

²⁹Phan Phat Huon, *History of The Catholic Church in Vietnam, Tome I (1533-1960)*, Long Beach, Ca: Cuu The Tung Thu, 2000, 690.

³⁰*Advanced Oxford American Dictionary*, c.v. “venerate” and “worship.”

³¹Simeon Abiodun Ige, “The Cult of Ancestors in African Traditional Religion,” in *An Eccyclopaedia of The Arts*, 10, 1 (2006) 28.

the word “worship” is “to show respect for God or a god, especially by saying prayers, singing, etc. with other people in a religious building.” Worship, in its strict theological usage, suggests the acknowledgment of God’s unique and dominion over universe which is expressed by human adoration, reverence and submission to God. Simply “showing respect by saying prayers, singing... with other people in a religious building” does not necessarily constitute an act of worship. As Abiodun Ige³² points out, the Roman Catholic Church has a situation very analogous to African and Vietnamese attitude towards their ancestors. The Virgin Mary and saints are highly honoured and venerated. They receive great honour and respect through prayers and songs in a religious building, but Christians never consider them as God. The honour and prayers said to them does not end with them but goes to God who has the power responsible for preserving their existence, family, and entire universe.

3.2. Africans do not Worship their Ancestors

As mentioned above, worship in its strict theological usage suggests the acknowledgment of God’s unique and dominion over the universe and is expressed by human adoration and submission. Africans recognize the existence of one God as the transcendental Being who is Creator and Sustainer. As we have seen in the role of ancestors, they are mediators and intermediaries between human beings and supreme God. Mbiti confirms, “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.”³³ God as transcendental Being is always the object of worship. However, in daily life, African people seem to pay more attention to ancestors because of their intermediate role. Ancestors are still integral members of the community and they are closer to God. As Magesa states,

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.³⁴

³²Ige, “The Cult of Ancestors in African Traditional Religion,” 28.

³³Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 33.

³⁴Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion in the Dialogue Debate: From Intolerance to Coexistence*, Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010, 59.

The rituals and practices that have been called ancestor worship, e.g., building shrines and placing food and drink or mentioning them in prayers, do not constitute worship. Rather, all these are acts of honour and veneration. Mbiti confirms clearly,

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.³⁵

It is true that ancestors play a central role in the life of the community, not because they are treated as God, but because they are an integral part of the community. Ancestral rituals and practices show the sense of community, solidarity and communion with departed members. Mbiti explains,

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.³⁶

Therefore, African ancestral veneration should not be considered as worshipping. It is the manifestation of honour, gratitude, respect, veneration rendered to the departed members of the community and a desire of communion.

3.3. Vietnamese do not Worship their Ancestors

In Vietnam, the cult of ancestors is often called "*dao tho ong ba*," which literally means religion that worships ancestors.³⁷ The use of terms such as "religion" and "worship" in connection with ancestral practices and rites was scandalous to early Christian missionaries, since they represented what appeared to be at once superstition. However, in Vietnamese, the word "*tho*," which literally means "worship," does not have the same meaning as adoration which is reserved only for God. The word "*tho*" is often used together with the word "*kinh*," which literally means respect.

³⁵Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 18.

³⁶Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 9.

³⁷Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholic*, 51.

Therefore, the Vietnamese often use these words in pairs which mean venerate-respect.³⁸ It is a word used to ascribe honour, worth, or excellence to any one whether a sage, living parents, Christian saints, or God. Peter Phan rightly claims, "The old objection that the cult of ancestors... is superstitious is a red herring, because no Vietnamese who practices this cult believes that the ancestors are divine"³⁹

From a Vietnamese perspective ancestral veneration is not related to ghosts, spiritism or even the supernatural as these terms are understood in a Western sense; rather it emphasizes filial piety, or "*dao hieu*." The concept captures the love, honour and respect that children are to give to their parents, grandparents. Ancestral veneration is rooted in a deep sense of gratitude to those who, with immense sacrifices, have given life to their children and nurtured them.⁴⁰ The children have sacred obligation to love and respect their parents in return. Because a full repayment cannot be fulfilled during parents' life-times, children must continue respect and "repay the debts" for their parents after their deaths in the form of ancestor veneration as a part of filial piety which has been considered the most important virtue of Confucianism. This is a great debt that no one can ever repay sufficiently.⁴¹

From a cultural perspective, the ancestral veneration is the ritual manifestation of gratitude, honour, and respect rendered to their parents in old age as well as after death. Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit missionary in China, makes a careful note about Chinese filial piety, claiming it is a form of veneration rather than worship:

The most solemn thing... is the offering they annually make to the dead at certain times of the year ...in this act they make the fulfilment of their duty to their relatives, namely, "to serve them in death as though they were alive." ...They do this because they know of no other way to show their love and grateful spirit toward them [the dead]... 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.⁴²

³⁸Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholic*, 52.

³⁹ Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, New York: Orbis, 2003, 126.

⁴⁰Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholic*, 53.

⁴¹Tran, *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors*, 111.

⁴²Tran, *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors*, 131, cited in George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy From its Beginning to Modern Times*, Illinois: Loyola University, 1985, 17-18.

The children intend to serve the departed parents as though they were still alive. The rituals of ancestral veneration consist in making offerings in the form of drinks, cooked foods, fruits, and other things as a sign of gratitude and love. Although the living are aware that the departed members will not come to eat libations for them, it is their means of showing their love and gratitude toward the dead.

As we have seen in both cases of Africans and Vietnamese, the cult of ancestor is mainly an expression of honour, gratitude, and respect toward their ancestors who have been regarded as “living dead.” Ancestors are those whose presence we can still feel and with whom we can continue to communicate because of our love for those persons. The rituals and acts of ancestral veneration, which focus on remembering, honouring and loving ancestors, play significant roles in the lives of the Africans and Vietnamese. Veneration of ancestors is one of the most sacred acts of a Vietnamese,⁴³ and the most important heritage of Africans.⁴⁴ However, western missionaries tended to see these rituals and ceremonies as paganism, superstition, and heresy. It is impossible to eradicate the deeply rooted veneration of ancestors in the minds of African and Vietnamese even now. The continuing notion of ancestral veneration prompted African and Vietnamese theologians to find ways to reconcile the concept with message of Gospel. The African theologians turn to ancestral Christology as an attempt to “make Jesus Christ feel at home with the framework or the ordinary experience of African Christian,”⁴⁵ while Vietnamese Church tries to adapt in liturgical rituals.

4. Attempts to Reconcile Ancestral Veneration with Christianity

4.1. African Theologians and Ancestral Christology

4.1.1. Charles Nyamiti: Christ as Brother-Ancestor

Nyamiti considers ancestors with regard to his Christology which is firmly rooted in the Trinity. He uses the beliefs and practices of the African perspective as a starting point. In other words, he begins from consideration and appreciation of the ancestral relationship between the living and the dead, then inquires into the relationship

⁴³Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholic*, 53.

⁴⁴E. Gwembe, “Ancestors in African Culture,” in *The Church and Culture: Conference Papers*, ed. M. Makobane, M.B. Sithole, and M. Shiya, Germiston: Mazenot Institute, 1995, 30.

⁴⁵Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, New York: Orbis Books, 2008, 74.

between God the Father as the Ancestor of the Son, and God the Son as the descendent of the Father. The Father and the Son communicate the Holy Spirit to each other as an ancestral oblation and gift of their mutual love.⁴⁶ In the Trinitarian notion of God, there is a true doxological, eucharistic and ritual properties. The outcome of this Trinitarian ceremony is to achieve the intimate unification of the Father as the Ancestor and the Son as God's descendant in the Holy Spirit. Because "the incarnation and redemptive ministry of Christ, culminating in the paschal mystery, are the extension of the Trinitarian ancestral communication to the man Jesus, and through him, to the rest of creation."⁴⁷

In the mystery of the Incarnation, the Son was made flesh and became man. As Christ was born of Mary, a descendant of Adam, he naturally related to all humanity by virtue of shared descent and became our brother:

Considered as man Jesus is our natural Brother in Adam, like anyone of us is. It is obvious that when seen from this purely human perspective, Christ was like all men a descendant of Adam, and had natural family and tribal relationships. After His death He became—again like all men—a Brother—Ancestor in Adam. This Brother-Ancestorship is purely natural, it is Christian in origin of all men in Adam.⁴⁸

Through Jesus Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection, humanity become adopted sons and daughters of the Father and brothers and sisters of the Son. Nyamiti elaborates,

Through His incarnation, death and resurrection, He saved us... and became thereby our true Brother-Ancestor. This is not only because his Incarnation and paschal mystery enabled us to be God's adoptive sons in Him, but also because through Him, as natural Son of the Father even as man, humanity was reconciled to God.⁴⁹

Consequently, God the Father becomes our Ancestor through Christ—just as God is the Father through the same Logos incarnate. God the Father is human Parent-Ancestor and all are God's true sons, daughters and descendants. This Ancestorship to human beings through Christ is made possible by the fact that through his status as God-man and our Redeemer.

⁴⁶Nyamiti, *Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of Humankind*, 4.

⁴⁷Nyamiti, "African Christologies Today," in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, ed. J.N.K. Mugambi & L. Magesa, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 1998, 27.

⁴⁸Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor*, 28.

⁴⁹Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor*, 30.

Moreover, Christ as our brother-ancestor meets all the prerequisite conditions for an ancestor within African perspective. He realizes all that being a brother-ancestor entails: he is mediator and high priest and lived an exemplary life for all Christians. Yet, Nyamiti also acknowledges the difference between Christ and traditional African ancestors. Based on Christ's origin as Son of God, Christ's ancestorship subsumes and eminently transcends the limited notion of brother-ancestry. Christ completes and perfects Africans' notion about ancestor. Christ is no longer one among many ancestors, but Christ is the universal Brother-Ancessor.⁵⁰

4.1.2. Benézet Bujo: Christ as Proto-ancestor

Benézet Bujo's understanding of Christ as Ancestor is quite similar to the understanding of Nyamiti as Orobator⁵¹ observes. However, Bujo prefers the title "Proto-Ancessor" which is considered very fitting for Christ and can be easily grasped by Africans who know very well what an "ancestor" means.

In the mystery of the Incarnation, God has entered human nature by totally assuming the human condition with all its values and aspirations including weaknesses, misery, suffering and death. Only in this way can human beings find the fullness of self-fulfilment because from now on, human nature is assumed by God's divinity. The encounter of man-God in the mystery of incarnation becomes the unique and highest degree of realization for man's identity. Bujo writes, "What is more, Jesus Christ, the present Word made flesh, is the privileged and unique place of the total revelation of humankind. If Jesus Christ is the explanation of God, he is also the explanation of humankind."⁵² Hence, Jesus Christ can be considered analogically as "Proto-Ancessor," who is the unique and inevitable meeting place between Supreme God and humanity.

Moreover, the Supreme God is the ultimate Supreme Origin of life. This life force is transmitted through the mediation of the ancestors to their living descendants. And because Christ is Proto-Ancessor, then He is also proto-source of life and therefore, accomplishes and perfects the role of ancestor as transmitting life. Orobator explains, "Jesus Christ alone realizes this ancestral ideal and embodies all its virtues in the 'highest degree' by elevating it to a superior level of 'new fulfilment,' it becomes inadequate to

⁵⁰Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 76.

⁵¹Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 76.

⁵²Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 83.

consider Christ merely as one member of the communion of ancestors.”⁵³ Christ shares his life force with believers in the Eucharist. It is the means of nourishing and renewing the life of the community, the life that is not merely biological generation, but rather mystical and spiritual. Jesus as proto-ancestor bestows life to all the member of community.

4.2. Vietnamese Church and Liturgical Inculturation⁵⁴

While African theologians try to do theology from their own cultural, social and religious background to help African people meet Jesus in their ordinary life, the Vietnamese bishops turn to adapt Vietnamese ancestral veneration in liturgical rituals. The Vietnamese bishops introduced two properly liturgical innovations of the Eucharist within Vietnamese traditions.

The first innovation is the expansion of the prayer for the dead in the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass. In the second Eucharistic Prayer, instead of the simple formula: “Remember our brothers and sisters who have gone to their rest in the hope of rising again,” the Vietnamese memento of the dead reads: “Remember also the faithful, our brothers and sisters, who rest in peace in the expectation of the resurrection, and the dead who can only trust in your mercy. Remember in particular our *ancestors*, our parents and our friends who have left this world.”⁵⁵ Obviously, the explicit mention of ancestors is an attempt to inculturate ancestral veneration into the liturgy.

The second liturgical innovation in the Vietnamese liturgy is the Mass for the celebration of the Lunar New Year or Tet. For the Vietnamese, Tet is the most important cultural and religious feast of the year. It is the celebration of the family: all members of the family are supposed to return to the ancestral home to show gratitude and respect to their ancestors and to renew the family bond. Recognizing the importance of Tet, the Vietnamese bishops have undertaken to solemnize it with Eucharistic celebrations. Five Mass formulas have been composed to express the various meanings of Tet and are now in use: the first for the end of the year is to give thanks and ask for forgiveness, the second for New Year’s Eve is to celebrate the passage into the New Year, the third for the first day of the New Year is to praise God and to ask for peace and prosperity,

⁵³Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 76.

⁵⁴See Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholic*, 121-127.

⁵⁵ Vietnamese Roman Catholic Missal, Vietnam: The Liturgical Commission of the Vietnamese Episcopal Conference, 1992, 1042-1044. In the Eucharistic Prayer # 2.

the fourth for the second day is to pray for ancestors, grandparents and parents, and the fifth for the third day is to pray for the sanctification of labour.

For our current purpose of inculturating ancestral veneration into liturgy, the fourth formula shows special significant elements:

Collect: Merciful Father, you have taught us to practice filial piety. Today, on New Year's Day, we have gathered to honour the memory of our ancestors, grandparents and parents. Deign to reward abundantly those who have brought us into this world, nurtured us, and educated us. Help us live in conformity with our duties toward them...

Prayer over the Gifts: Lord, accept our offerings and bestow your graces abundantly upon our ancestors, grandparents and parents, so that we may in our turn inherit their blessings...

Preface: ... You have given life to our ancestors, grandparents and parents so that they may transmit it to us. You have also filled them with good things so we may inherit them by knowing you, adoring you, and serving you...

The inclusion of the veneration of ancestors into the language of the Mass, and especially the mention of the term "ancestor" in the Eucharistic Prayer, mark a phenomenal step in liturgical inculturation in Vietnam. This is important theologically for at least two reasons. Firstly, by mentioning the ancestors explicitly in the Eucharistic Prayer and by praying for them, the Vietnamese text does not distinguish between Christian and non-Christian ancestors. The ancestors are venerated not because they have been saved or were holy but simply because they are ancestors. By the virtue of filiality, descendants are bound to honour them and in turn, hope for the protection of their ancestors. This incorporation of non-Christian ancestor into the liturgy implies that they should never be considered outside of the gift of salvation simply because they were not Christians. Secondly, in the liturgy for Tet cited above, there is an affirmation that somehow the ancestors act as mediators of the blessings and graces that their descendants receive from God. The descendants are said to "inherit" these blessings from their ancestors.

Conclusion: Lessons for Vietnamese Theologians from African Christology

The cult of ancestors holds an important place in families and social life of both Africans and Vietnamese. One of the most

contentious issues in missionary work in Africa or Vietnam has been the question of the veneration of the ancestors because almost all Africans and Vietnamese believe and practice ancestral rituals as an integral part of their culture and daily life. Faced with the issue of inculturation, African and Vietnamese churches respond in two directions. African theologians have tried to pose the question from their own context of faith. In this way, the message of the Gospels is rooted in their cultural context and makes Christ receptive to the ordinary African in such a way that he may no longer be considered a stranger in Africa, but one of their own. Jesus Christ can be called Brother-Ancestor for Nyamiti or Proto-Ancestor for Bujo. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese church turns to adaptation rather than inculturation for the question of ancestral veneration. It is an effort to reconcile the Vietnamese culture with the message of the Gospels. However, Vietnamese theologians can learn many lessons from the African theologians. Here, I want to present two simple lessons:

First of all, a Vietnamese theology must start from the social-political, cultural, and religious Vietnamese context. As Peter Phan asserts, “the context is not something external to theology to which Christian doctrines and liturgical rituals are adapted.”⁵⁶ Rather, contextual realities become resources for theology insofar as they manifest the presence and action of God. Ancestral veneration has been an incentive for African Christology and theology especially with Bujo and Nyamiti.

Secondly, following African theologians’ effort to reimage Jesus Christ connecting to ancestral belief, the Vietnamese can address Jesus as the Eldest Brother⁵⁷ who is the model of filial piety. As explained above, according to Vietnamese culture, filial piety is the most fundamental virtue and it is exercised by taking care of parents while they are alive, and practice ancestral veneration after their deaths. Though the duty of filial piety obliges for all children, the eldest son is in charge of main role in taking care of living parents and ancestral home. In the Gospel, Jesus is described as the firstborn Son (Lk 2:7; Mt 1:25.) as the first-born Son, Jesus is also the eldest Brother. Because we have been adopted by God as God’s children, we have a share in Jesus’ unique Sonship and become his sisters and brothers. Moreover, Jesus is depicted in the gospels as the model of filial piety, particularly in his obedience to his Father’s

⁵⁶Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholic*, 102.

⁵⁷Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholic*, 106-107.

will even accepting death. In obedience, he offers his perfect sacrifice of filial obedience to God. Besides that, Jesus always behaves toward his mother with respect and tender love, carrying out her wishes in the miracle of turning water into wine (Jn 2: 1-12), and looking after her well-being by dedicating his mother to John, his beloved disciple (Jn 19: 26 -27.) Jesus can be seen as the Eldest Brother who is the epitome of filial piety. The view of Jesus as the Eldest Son and Eldest Brother is naturally accommodated by Vietnamese filial piety.