

## REVISITING AFRICAN CULTURE: A WAY TO GLOBAL HARMONY AND PEACE

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### **Abstract**

Customs, traditions, attitudes, values, norms, ideas, symbols and language govern human behaviour patterns. It is almost impossible to conceive of a people without such phenomena that sum up a people's culture, for that would mean that such people do not experience or have no knowledge about the world in which they live. Culture therefore determines the way in which the world around a people is understood. The multitude of cultures in Africa has in this perspective played a remarkable role in innumerable ways in the formation and growth of Christian faith right from its infancy. However, on the global scene African culture has often been understood largely in a negative sense. This contribution aims at rectifying this perspective by proffering the African culture as a model for global peace and reconciliation. It intends to achieve this by analyzing the African culture with its comprehension of humanity and peace as embodied in its "Ubuntu" concept, its traditional proverbs, and its unique indigenous religious and spiritual symbol, Jesus as Proto African Ancestor. The article strives to emphasize the point that when such practices are reawakened and emulated worldwide they could

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engender harmony of global significance, and forge a pathway for global harmony and peace.

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## Introduction

Broadly speaking, the term culture is the entire way of living of a particular group of people or the sum total of the peculiarities shared by a people.<sup>1</sup> Human beings identify with their culture knowingly or unknowingly during the process of social interaction. One can reasonably argue that while people are shaped by culture, culture itself is made and fashioned by people. Although African cultures display tremendous diversities with thousands of ethnic groups and subgroups, they do however share some remarkable similarities in their belief system. Hence, it is better to speak of African *cultures* instead of *an African culture*, since there is no one homogenous culture in Africa, but several cultures.<sup>2</sup>

One can observe two aspects in the analysis of a culture or a people. The first is the consistent worldview shared by the people along with the system of social requirements and roles and beliefs within the society, and the second, a formal statement of this worldview viz., a rational analysis and systematic statement. In Africa, however, many societies have no such formal philosophy. Hence, some western thinkers assumed that the people of Sub-Saharan Africa had no capacity to philosophize.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the European/Western worldview, which is more rational and scientific, and the Asian worldview, which is more subjective/mystic and

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<sup>1</sup>L. Legrand, *The Bible On Culture/Belonging or Dissenting*, Maryknoll/New York: Orbis Books, 2000, 73: "It [culture] connotes the entire mental set up acquired through the geographical, ethnic, linguistic, familial, professional, social and religious environment, covering among other fields like food and cuisine, forms of work and recreation, ways of dressing, daily and yearly rhythms of life, type of imagination, symbolic fields and so on."

<sup>2</sup>There is no doubt that cultures are diverse. They differ not only from continent to continent, but also from nation to nation. Even within nations they vary from one ethnic group to another. Hence there is a multitude of cultures varying geographically, ecologically, linguistically, in terms of their identities and developments in the world. In this sense, we can speak of different cultures like Indian culture, Kenyan culture, Chinese culture, etc. In a broader sense, we can also think of Asian culture, European culture, African culture etc. In particular, Africa is inhabited by various ethnic nationalities with their different languages, modes of dressing, eating, dancing and even greeting habits. It varies not only from one country to another, but within each country as well.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G.J. Wanjohi, *Philosophy and Liberation of Africa*, Nairobi: Nyaturima Publications, 2017, 13.

experiential, the African view is person/event oriented and religious in nature. From the very beginning Africa had her own form of civilization and worldview enshrined in her oral traditions and religious beliefs. These indigenous beliefs and values helped Africans to accept and appreciate one another and in doing so, African culture could establish a foundation for the peace building within Africa at first and in the world at large.<sup>4</sup> The African worldview often seemed strange to Europeans as they failed to appreciate the value of African culture, and some Arab Muslims and European Christian missionaries who came to evangelize the people even branded them as barbaric. This was mainly due to the fact that the colonizers and foreign missionaries had failed to understand the continent's rich traditional heritage and cultural orientations.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, the main thrust of this discussion is to discover the richness of African culture with its unique religious and spiritual symbols and, in turn, to discern how it could contribute to fostering global harmony and peace. I will, therefore, focus on three important areas of African culture, namely, African concept of *Ubuntu*, African Proverbs and Jesus as the Proto-Ancestor, in order to demonstrate that if such unique values of African culture are reawakened in the minds of people, it would facilitate harmony and peace among peoples and nations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Peacebuilding among various ethnic groups in Kenya is crucial as we see tribal clashes within the country.

<sup>5</sup>Most often in the past, the African continent has been considered as an appendix to Europe. Evidently, from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, Christianity was brought to Africa by the Western cultures and they never separated the Christian values from their own cultural values. They did not distinguish between the Western norms and Christian values. The challenge for the global community in general and Christianity in particular is to allow African cultures to dialogue with Christianity and other world cultures. In fact, there is not much conflict between African cultures and Christianity, but what is needed is to let them express African Christianity with African categories.

<sup>6</sup>To restrict my present study, I mainly focus on these three values which are mostly applicable in most parts of Africa. In particular, they are the characteristic traits of some of the ethnic groups within Kenya, such as Kamba, Kikuyu, and Luo. It is through the lived experience of these groups that I am inspired to write this article.

Undoubtedly, every ethnic culture has many values, which can facilitate peacebuilding and harmony. For example, "greetings" in all spheres of life, are a commonly accepted practice of all people of Africa. The different ways and gestures of expressing greetings are the following: word of mouth, hug/embrace, handshake, waving, winking, patting, smile, kiss. Cf. D.V. Nkoyoyo, "Greetings as a Religious Ritual in an African Context," in *African Cultures and Religion 1* (1999) 20-29, 21. The other cultural values or the way of life in Africa include their respect for the elders, dance and music, etc, which are, in fact, the heartbeats of everybody in the continent.

## 1. Ubuntu, a Theological Concept for Peace

The term “ubuntu” defines the existence of every human being in relation to the existence of the other.<sup>7</sup> It is aptly elaborated by the dictum: “A person is a person because of or through others.”<sup>8</sup> This is one of the absolute values of identifying oneself with the community. It is not just a philosophy in Africa, but spirituality and ethic of African traditional life. Unfortunately, however, in the present context of Africa, the wonderful value of ethnicity has turned into ethnocentric arrogance. As some scholars rightly observe, “individualism is steadily gaining the upper hand over the African’s renowned communal sense.”<sup>9</sup> Hence, it is an opportune time to rediscover the value of Ubuntu as it invokes the spirit of oneness among the cultures in Africa.

The concept of Ubuntu dates back several centuries and appears in various forms in the world. It is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony, and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring.<sup>10</sup> It promotes the spirit of African civilization, shared self-understanding and national identity. The application of

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Hence, as we live in a ‘global village,’ it is necessary and relevant to know and appreciate the different cultural values in Africa, which in turn, will pave the way for the foundation of peace and reconciliation in the world. In fact, many of the cultural values have gone dormant, to a certain extent, due to Western influence, and above all, the obsessive consumerism and secularism which lead people think and act egoistically. Hence, during this digital age, African societies face various challenges such as tribalism, regionalism, ethnocentrism, single parenthood, witchcraft, corruption, social and gender inequality, insecurity, etc. cf. J. Thachuparamban, “African Christianity: A Living and Vibrant Repository of Christian Faith- Part 11”, *Asian Horizons* 12 (2018) 345-361.

<sup>7</sup>The word ‘Ubuntu’ is associated with a Nguni (IsiZulu) maxim/aphorism: *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*, meaning ‘a person is a person because of or through others.’ The origin of Ubuntu can be traced to the Bantu peoples of southern Africa although the philosophy is now shared across most of the nations of Africa. The derivatives of Ubuntu in Bantu languages can be seen as follows, for example: Ubundu or Umtu or Umuntu in isiZulu and isiXhosa language (South Africa), Utu in Swahili language (Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda), Abantu (Uganda). For further details see PhD thesis by James Kamwachale Khomba -University of Pretoria “Redesigning the Balanced Scorecard Model: An African Perspective,” (University of Pretoria. 2011), <https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/28706/04chapter4.pdf?sequence=5>, p.128 (accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> December, 2020).

<sup>8</sup>C.W. Gichuru, *Ethics for Africa Today, An introduction to Business Ethics*, Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2008, 79.

<sup>9</sup>P. Lwaminda, “The Church as Family and the Quest for Justice and Peace in Africa,” in C. McGarry and P. Reyen, ed., *Inculturating the Church in Africa, Theological and Practical Perspective*, Nairobi: St. Paul’s Publications, 2001, 251.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. D. Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, London: Reider, 1999, 34-35.

this concept runs through the veins of almost all Africans as a bond of unity (Ubuntu); and this thought is integrated into all aspects of everyday living among all the tribes of *Bantu* origin in Africa. It has therefore been described as a /tool of peace building, and the guiding concept of the 'African Renaissance.'

The essence of Ubuntu is to promote a culture of harmony and tolerance, peaceful co-existence and mutual development. Desmond Tutu observes: "I am a human being because I belong, I participate and I share. A person with 'ubuntu' is open and available to others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good."<sup>11</sup> Based on the spirit of Ubuntu, it can be seen that African society is basically humanist, communitarian and social.<sup>12</sup> Hence, one of the striking features of African culture is the community dimension, which is the foundation of African thought and life as is reflected in the famous African dictum "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."<sup>13</sup> Every single human being becomes a true human being only in relationship with others in the society. "To be a human being is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them."<sup>14</sup> The emphasis here is on the interdependence and interconnectedness of the individual and the whole community. Basically, the individual achieves the status of personhood in the community and not outside of it. This communitarian aspect of Ubuntu thought is better understood in the traditional East African practices of *Harambe*, which in Swahili means working together, caring and sharing.<sup>15</sup>

This concept of Ubuntu, if given a proper global consideration and appreciation, would undoubtedly play a key role in the endeavor for global harmony, since it stands in contrast to the rampant individualism and insensitive competitiveness of the contemporary world. The behaviour patterns embodied in Ubuntu reveal that an

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<sup>11</sup>Tutu, *No Future*, 10.

<sup>12</sup>The similarity between Marxist communalism and African Ubuntu is that both aim at fostering the common good. The first one is liberation theory responding to a context, whereas Ubuntu is an inherent aspect in people's life style.

<sup>13</sup>J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1969, 108.

<sup>14</sup>M.B. Ramosa, "The Philosophy of Ubuntu and Ubuntu as a Philosophy," in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux, ed., *The African Philosophy Reader, Second Edition A Text with Readings*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press of Southern Africa, 2002, 231.

<sup>15</sup>Gichuru, *Ethics for Africa Today*, 220: "A form of collective effort for the benefit of community in terms of water, roads, schools, health, security is called *Harambe*. It means, 'let's pull together.'"

African society, which is humanist in nature, is also more community-based and socialist than Western society which seems to be more individualistic and pragmatic in nature. Sadly though, I think, Africa has in the present time lost her unique values in the process of imitating Western culture. It is in this context that we need to rediscover the Ubuntu philosophy of unity both for the welfare of the world in general and of Africa in particular. As a road map for global harmony Ubuntu optimizes the African philosophy of respect and human dignity that is fundamental to being able to transcend ethnic divisions, racism, religious differences, and political discrepancies that have been proven historically as roadblocks to human global harmony.

Other nations in the world could be motivated to train their behaviour patterns using Ubuntu as a philosophy because doing so can help various communities to develop a better understanding of each other and this is crucial to promoting global harmony. As Laurenti Magesa rightly observes, the spirit of Ubuntu is manifested in self-giving, and readiness to cooperate and communicate with others. He classifies it as two broad categories of moral virtues—interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. In the former sense, what is expected is respect and care for others, manifested as ‘tolerance, patience, generosity, hospitality and readiness to cooperate.’ In the latter sense, it calls for ‘integrity, a solidity or wholeness of character and spirit that is present in one’s judgments, one’s decisions and one’s feelings.’ In other words, it is an invitation to acknowledge personal integrity as well as the cosmic and spiritual communion with the entire universe.<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly each letter of the term, U-B-U-N-T-U could be expanded to describe the basic tenets of Ubuntu philosophy: **U**niversal (global), **B**ehaviour (humane, caring and loving), **U**nity (harmony, solidarity), **N**egotiation (consensus), **T**olerance (patience, inclusion) and **U**nderstanding (sensitivity, empathy).<sup>17</sup> Thus the word *Ubuntu* becomes an acronym. In truth, this African concept is an alternative to the individualistic and utilitarian philosophies that tend to dominate the West. In comparison with Western wisdom “I think therefore I am,” African wisdom says: “We are therefore I am.” And, in African culture, this ‘we-ness’ or togetherness is primarily expressed in proverbs. So, what follows is a discussion of African

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<sup>16</sup>Cf. L. Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*, Nairobi: Action Publishers, 2014, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. K.J. Kamwachale, *Redesigning the Balanced Scorecard Model: An African Perspective*, 132.

proverbs used as language of diplomacy/mediation that fosters harmonious existence among people.

## 2. African Proverbs

African communities believe that their future depends on the ethical conduct of their members. So, to nurture this they generally use fairy tales, proverbs, legends, riddles, and other narratives as tools for advice, reproach, warning and encouragement for a good life. Proverbs are the most important expressions of human wisdom and knowledge for the people of Africa.<sup>18</sup> They are found both in written and unwritten form in all African languages and dialects. They are very much part of everyday conversation, and are given the label of the name of the country and province of its origin. In that sense, they are the true expressions of African philosophy. "They reveal the unity of mankind and universality of our human emotions, thoughts and problems."<sup>19</sup>

Thus, proverbs in African tradition are a medium of instilling moral values, instructing familial and communal virtues for living wisely in society. For instance, we find African ethics expressed in various African proverbs which recognize the individual only in relation to other members of the community.<sup>20</sup> This is seen in proverbs from various parts of African society, for example, Luo people in Kenya say: *Jodongo ariyo motii ok nyal negore* (Two old men will not kill each other).<sup>21</sup> Here Luo wisdom encourages and emphasizes peaceful coexistence. In traditional Africa, elderliness was associated with power and authority. People who share the same fate shouldn't be fighting because they depend on each other for survival. Hence, this wise saying emphasizes the responsibility of elders to use power wisely for the benefit of the people rather than fostering war and division, as the negative usage of power will result in war and conflict. It is through dialogue and consensus that people

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<sup>18</sup>J. Knappert, *The A-Z of African Proverbs*, London: Karnak House, 1989, 2: "Proverbs are short expressions of wit, containing the wisdom of past generations in condensed form, often in rhythmic language, easy to remember and pleasing to hear." For a detailed discussion on the different forms of African oral literature, especially on Proverbs, see R. Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1976, 389-425.

<sup>19</sup>Knappert, *A-Z of African Proverbs*, 3.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. M.F. Murove, "Beyond the Savage Evidence Ethic: A Vindication of African Ethics," in *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, M.F. Murove, ed., Scottsville: KwaZulu Natal Press, 2011, 301.

<sup>21</sup>Another interesting Luo proverb goes like this: "Chako chon loyo dhi ajuoga" (=An ounce of prevention is better a pound of cure).

should strive to resolve the problems they face. The underlying message of this proverb is: no matter how deep a conflict is, the natural state of existence leads to peace and harmony.

Another proverb in Tanzania states *Figa moja haliinjiki chungu* (One cooking stone does not hold a pot). Here the stress is on unity, community, and togetherness. Usually, one needs three cooking stones to be able to balance a pot. In the same way one needs others to be able to function. One can achieve only the very minimum alone, and some activities are totally impossible without the help of others. Yet another proverb in Swahili is *Umoja ni nguvu, utengano ni udhaifu* (Unity is strength, division is weakness). This shows clearly the importance of solidarity, cooperation and interdependence. All these proverbs emphasize that whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole community, and vice versa.<sup>22</sup>

African proverbs also highlight the importance of unity and cordiality within the family.<sup>23</sup> All such proverbs complement each other, and emphasize the value of amicable family relations. Though proverbs may refer to specific contexts or even historic persons or movements, their assertions have universal applicability. They are rich indices of the quest for peace, as well as tools for peaceful coexistence and harmony in the world. In order to foster global harmony, a rediscovery and re-awakening of these African wise sayings would ultimately play a fundamental role in the harmonizing our contemporary society. Like the philosophy of the Greeks, the Mosaic Laws of the Hebrews, and the Indian sacred writings of the Vedas and Upanishads, which were all the quintessence of their respective cultures, African proverbs can also equally be seen as the bedrock of African culture. Proverbs are very much part of every culture and contain the wisdom of the people. The man who is universally considered the embodiment of wisdom is King Solomon, so that even his name is symbolic of wisdom. However, Africans look up to their ancestors as the repository of wisdom. And therefore, since Jesus is greater than even Solomon, he is held up as the Proto-

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<sup>22</sup>A few examples of proverbs which focus on communitarian dimension of the society are the following: "If you want to go quickly go alone, but if you want to go far go together" (Kenya); "Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too, if one says no to the other, let his wing break" (Nigeria) and "harmony with neighbors brings peace" (Zimbabwe). More interestingly, a Kamba proverb from Kenya which promotes unity and strength of the people, goes as follows: "Kithethesyo ki muka" (=hard work brings fruit).

<sup>23</sup>For example: 'A family is like a forest; when you are outside it is dense, when you are inside you see that each tree has its place' (Ethiopia); and 'A united family eats from the same plate,' (Baganda).



African Ancestor since he functions as the perfect model of Ubuntu in African culture.

### 3. Jesus, the Proto-African Ancestor

In every culture the concept of God is one of the most fundamental beliefs. Human beings from time immemorial have always been consistently contemplating on this concept either in solitude, or in the midst of their social lives. So, one may naturally ask this question: does the concept of God come from within or without? Can one think of an African concept of God? For this purpose, it is important to discuss the concept of the African God embodied in the ancestor veneration that is Jesus presented as the perfect embodiment of the African Ancestor, and the ideal realization of universal Ubuntu.<sup>24</sup>

The prevalence of the practice of ancestral reverence and that of praying to them is common for both Jewish and some African cultures and it possibly a universal phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> In traditional African society ancestral veneration is one of the fundamental pillars of their religious practices.<sup>26</sup> It is an attempt to preserve good relations with the departed kin. It is an establishment of a form of networking between the living and their ancestors. Scholars in Africa attempt to stress the importance of intermediaries in the African way of life and spirituality. The notion of communion with the dead is central to the worldview of African peoples as is evident in their funeral rites, and the rites of initiation.

Although ancestral veneration takes different forms in different African societies, the cult of the dead is an integral part of African culture.<sup>27</sup> According to John Mbiti:

The idea of intermediaries fits well with the African view of the universe, which holds that the invincible world is in some ways higher than that of man, but God is higher still. In order to reach God effectively it may be useful to approach him by first

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<sup>24</sup>In some ethnic groups there is no cult of ancestors.

<sup>25</sup>For the belief in ancestral reference among the Jews, see Deut. 10:15; Gen. 50:24-25; Deut. 26:14; Is. 57:6.

<sup>26</sup>D. Kyeyume, "The Presence of the Triune God in the Church," in C. McGarry and P. Reyen, ed., *Inculturating the Church in Africa*, 166: "In Africa religiosity, religious symbols serve various purposes. They involve the presence of God and the ancestors among the people. They bring to mind for people the lineage of their ancestors in order to build up consciousness of their particular ethnic group and its traditions."

<sup>27</sup>Other indigenous peoples also venerate their ancestors—like Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc.

approaching those who are lower than he is but higher than the ordinary person.<sup>28</sup>

In order to understand Jesus from the African perspective the African Christian theologians have developed a variety of metaphors, images, and names for Jesus Christ. They have indicated how Jesus takes on various identities such as Brother, Elder, Healer, Liberator, Chief, Priest, and Ancestor. In fact, by these images, people in Africa are able to relate to Jesus Christ in a palpable way, the African way.<sup>29</sup>

In his earthly life, Jesus manifested all the qualities and virtues that Africans like to attribute to their ancestors which lead them to invoke their ancestors in daily life. He not only lived a virtuous life, but he also passed on everlasting life through his teaching, healing, and his passion, death and resurrection. Although Jesus suffered an ignominious death, he was buried according to prescribed rituals, and is still remembered generations after his departure from this life. Hence, Jesus as a mediator-ancestor becomes easily conceivable to many African communities who still believe that the spirit of their ancestors influences their lives. Benezet Bujo of Congo perceived Christ as the 'proto-ancestor,' the 'unique ancestor' and an 'ancestor par excellence.' He incorporates this view with the theology of incarnation.<sup>30</sup> As explicated in the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is higher than the Levitical priests, higher too than the angels; for his priesthood is the ultimate priesthood in the order of Melchizedek. Similarly, he enjoys a unique status of ancestor higher than that of the ancestors of Africa.

Jesus as Proto-Ancestor also means that Jesus is the source of all life. The central role of the ancestor is that he is the protector of life. Africans find in Christ a manifestation of those qualities which they attribute to their ancestors. Jesus nourishes the life of believers (Jn 6: 51), and so do the ancestors who remain with their descendants continuously strengthening them. Just as ancestors watch over their descendants, Jesus as the Perfect Ancestor is ever present with

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<sup>28</sup>J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, London: Heinemann, 1975, 63-64.

<sup>29</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 1995, # 127, emphasizes "bringing Christ into the very center of African life and of 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."

<sup>30</sup>B. Bujo, "A Christocentric Ethic for Black Africa," *Theology Digest* 30 (1982) 143-146, 143: "By becoming 'part of the earth,' Christ has made his own the whole history and legitimate aspirations of our ancestors. These ancestors become the locus (the human nature) where we encounter the God of salvation; and the Church becomes the unique and privileged locus of total encounter with those ancestors."

human beings (Mt 28: 20). Thus, it may be said, that as Proto-Ancestor, Jesus not only fulfilled the expectations of an ideal ancestor, but he also transcended that concept, sublimated it and brought it to fruition. No other ancestor is capable of such a deed: Jesus transformed humanity by his entry into it, and so his integration into the African concept of ancestorship, purifies this traditional status and elevates it to its absolute form.<sup>31</sup> In other words, he is not only the proto-ancestor, but he helps to sublimate and elevate the entire cult of the ancestors, by focusing attention not on the elaborate funeral rites, but on the life he continues to guarantee to his descendant group, or followers. He broadens the descendant group beyond the confines of the clan to a universal brotherhood and sisterhood. He purifies the family lineage retroactively, as is shown in the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 1:1-16).

V. Küster avers: "Jesus Christ is the exemplar Ancestor, who fulfills in himself the words and deeds of the mediation of our Ancestors."<sup>32</sup> Of course, this concept should not be understood literally but spiritually, for in fact, it has both philosophical and theological sense. This idea is also seen in the gospels which say: all those who believe in his name and do the will of the Father are born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of human will, but of God (Jn 1:13; Mt 12:48ff).<sup>33</sup>

Whilst the topic of African Ancestors draws various reactions from Christians in the rest of the world, it is a fact that African Christianity is incomplete without it. Hence, it can be affirmed that Jesus Christ as an Ancestor par excellence is a unique concept that helps the people of Africa to create a picture of Jesus as one endowed with an African culture and identity. Thus, faith in Jesus for African Christians is strengthened through their encounter with Jesus as the Ancestor par excellence. The cult of the ancestors (or ancestor veneration) is a central feature of African culture, and it forms part of the ethics of maintaining harmony between the living and the "living dead" (inter-generational harmony). The ritual offering of libations and sacrifices is a way of appeasing the anger that is provoked when a particular observance has been breached. It is a way of keeping the ancestors connected to the living people,

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. B. Bujo, *Christmas: God Became Man in Black Africa*, Nairobi, Pauline publications Africa, 1995, 66.

<sup>32</sup> V. Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001, 64.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. B. Bujo and J.I. Muya, ed., *African Theology: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, Nairobi, Pauline Publications Africa, 2003, 134.

so that they will implore God for his blessings and protection on behalf of the living. It is believed that if a family suffers misfortune (individually or collectively) then it is clear that the ancestors have not been effective in obtaining protection, and hence they need to be reminded, or coaxed to restore harmony within the descent group.

On a final note, the ancestors have the responsibility of being the guardians of morality in the community. They have earned this position due to the fact that they are revered as ancestors because they had lived a good life fostering communal harmony and peace. In the words of Bujo, theirs was a “virtuous life in accordance with certain norms which were issued and confirmed by a common ancestor and his successors.”<sup>34</sup> According to Mbiti they “act as the invisible police of the families and communities.”<sup>35</sup> The primary reason most Africans will not do something immoral is because of the belief that the ancestors are watching. They are believed to be able to see what other members of the community cannot see. Just as in the letter to the Hebrews, Christians are to be inspired by those who have lived faithfully; Africans too look up at their ancestors as role models showing them how to live ethically and spiritually. It is here that the concept that Jesus is the great founding ancestor becomes relevant. Bujo describes it thus: “If the vital force emanating from God actually passes through our ancestors, and, in particular, through the proto-ancestor of a clan, a Christian believer is convinced that God is similarly communicating his own divine life to us by means of his Messiah and Son, whom He thereby constituted as our Proto-ancestor.”<sup>36</sup> Thus African Christianity can be better understood by using African beliefs and practices such as Jesus as Proto-Ancestor. Therefore, Christ as a common ancestor can help all of humanity to overcome conflicts in society, to exist peacefully and to forge a pathway for global peace and harmony, because we are one family in Christ, one tribe, and one community.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>B. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998, 15.

<sup>35</sup>J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 2nd Edition, Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1989, 81-82.

<sup>36</sup>B. Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1990, 82. Cf. D.B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011, 143.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. D.J. Goergen, “The Quest for the Christ of Africa,” in *African Christian Studies* 17 (2001), 5-41, 8.

## **Conclusion**

In the light of the foregoing discussion on African worldview, I would like to affirm that African culture right from its beginning has been promoting peace, reconciliation and harmony. Whereas in the Western perspective humanity exists because of its thinking capacity (*Cogito ergo sum*), in Africa, human existence is defined with reference to its being a member of community (*Sumus ergo sum*). In the Africa tradition, life is conceived as communion, a communion with all realities including ancestors. Furthermore, the concept of Ubuntu emphasizes the need to bind the African people in solidarity, which means the community is more effective than the sum of the individuals. This is the underlying principle of Ubuntu thought; and this concept of unity and solidarity is effectively expressed in African proverbs. What one sees in the proverbs of Africa is a collective spirit of Africa, because the proverbs form an integral part of African culture. And for Christian believers in Africa, the perfect embodiment of Ubuntu is Jesus Christ, the Proto-Ancestor. This forms the African reflection on the mystery of Christ, whom they consider as the unique Ancestor, the source of life and the supreme model of ancestorship, whose life is embodied in every individual without limit. Thus, in conclusion, I reiterate that the African thinking of Ubuntu is capable of playing a central role in fostering universal fraternity as it provides a blueprint of global harmony and peace consistent with the traditional cultures of Africa.