
Reimagining Ancestral Cosmology in Contemporary Nigerian Christianity: A Theological Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the place of ancestral cosmology within contemporary Nigerian Christianity and the theological questions arising from its renewed presence in the lives of many Christians. Although Christianity has expanded rapidly in Nigeria, many believers still interpret life, death, illness, protection, and destiny through inherited African categories. Yet most churches either reject these assumptions completely or accept them without adequate theological reflection. This has produced a divided religious consciousness in which many Christians profess biblical faith publicly while privately retaining traditional understandings of the spiritual world. While previous studies have focused mainly on inculturation and contextual theology, little attention has been given to the constructive reinterpretation of ancestral cosmology within Christian thought. This study addresses that gap by investigating how ancestral ideas may be reimagined within Nigerian Christianity without weakening central Christian doctrines. The study adopts a qualitative, hermeneutical approach. It draws on biblical texts, African theological literature, and selected Nigerian cultural narratives. The works of John Mbiti and Kwame Bediako provide the major framework for dialogue between African religious consciousness and Christian faith. The study finds that ancestral cosmology, when critically interpreted in the light of Scripture, can function as a theological resource rather than a doctrinal threat. It deepens

understanding of identity, community, and the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds. The study concludes that Nigerian Christianity requires a more integrated expression of faith that is both genuinely Christian and authentically African.

Keywords: *Ancestral Cosmology, Nigerian Christianity, African Theology, Inculturation, Identity, Spirituality*

Introduction

The rapid expansion of Christianity in Nigeria over the past century has transformed the country's religious, cultural, and socio-political landscape. Nigeria is now home to one of the largest Christian populations in Africa, with vibrant Pentecostal, charismatic, evangelical, and historic mission churches shaping public discourse, moral formation, and community life¹³⁸. Yet beneath this remarkable numerical growth lies a persistent and unresolved theological tension: many Nigerian Christians publicly confess allegiance to Christ, participate actively in ecclesial life, and affirm biblical doctrines, while privately interpreting existential realities, illness, infertility, death, misfortune, dreams, protection, and destiny, through inherited African cosmological frameworks¹³⁹. This divided religious consciousness is not merely a sociological curiosity; it represents a profound theological challenge that demands careful scholarly attention, pastoral sensitivity, and doctrinal clarity.

For many Nigerians, reality is not sharply bifurcated into the sacred and the secular or the material and the spiritual. Instead, the African worldview traditionally perceives existence as an integrated continuum encompassing God, ancestors,

¹³⁸ Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 45–62.

¹³⁹ I. A. Chukwudebelu and G. C. Molokwu, "African Contextual Theology: A Holistic Response to Neo-Traditionalism in Igbo Society," *Journal of Media Culture and Communication* 2, no. 25 (2022): 22–24.

spirits, the living, and the unborn, all participating in a dynamic network of relationships¹⁴⁰. Within this cosmology, ancestors are not worshipped as deities but are honored as elder members of the community who have transitioned from the visible world to the invisible realm, yet remain intimately concerned with the welfare, moral conduct, and continuity of their lineage¹⁴¹. As John Mbiti famously articulated, in African traditional thought, “the dead are not dead,” because they continue to live in the memory, rituals, and moral expectations of the community¹⁴². This ancestral consciousness is not a relic of the past; it remains embedded in family structures, naming practices, burial rites, and crisis management strategies across many Nigerian ethnic groups, including the Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, Tiv, and Efik¹⁴³.

The advent of Christianity to Nigeria, beginning with Portuguese Catholic missions in the fifteenth century and expanding through Protestant and evangelical movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, brought a fundamentally different theological paradigm¹⁴⁴. Missionary Christianity often framed ancestral veneration, divination, and traditional spiritual practices as pagan, superstitious, or demonic, demanding complete renunciation as a condition for baptism and church membership¹⁴⁵. While this approach produced rapid conversions and institutional growth, it rarely engaged the underlying cosmological assumptions that shaped African identity. Consequently, many converts outwardly adopted

¹⁴⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 83–85.

¹⁴¹ J. S. Pobee, *Toward an African Christology* (Rome: Pontifical Urbaniana Press, 1979), 56–58.

¹⁴² Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 84.

¹⁴³ E. C. Ekeke and E. O. Ekpenyong, “A Comparative Study of Eschatology in Christianity and African Traditional Religion,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45, no. 1 (2024): 5–7.

¹⁴⁴ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 112–130.

¹⁴⁵ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 78–80.

Christian liturgy, doctrine, and morality while inwardly retaining ancestral frameworks to navigate suffering, fear, and uncertainty¹⁴⁶. The result is a dual religious consciousness, public Christianity and private ancestral orientation, existing side by side without theological integration.

Contemporary Nigerian churches have responded to this reality in two predominant, yet inadequate, ways. First, many evangelical and Pentecostal churches categorically reject ancestral cosmology, labelling it demonic, unbiblical, or incompatible with the gospel. This rejection is often accompanied by aggressive deliverance ministries, spiritual warfare rhetoric, and the demonization of traditional practices¹⁴⁷. While this approach seeks to protect biblical purity, it frequently alienates believers from their cultural heritage, fails to address the pastoral questions that drive people toward ancestral frameworks, and fosters secrecy, shame, and psychological fragmentation¹⁴⁸. Second, some mainline and independent churches tolerate or uncritically absorb ancestral practices without offering rigorous theological reflection. Inculturation initiatives sometimes blur the line between contextualization and syncretism, risking the dilution of Christ's unique mediatorial role and the sufficiency of biblical revelation¹⁴⁹. Both responses, though well-intentioned, leave Nigerian Christians without a coherent theological framework to navigate their inherited cosmological consciousness in light of Christian faith.

Scholars in African theology have increasingly argued that ancestral cosmology should neither be wholly rejected nor uncritically embraced, but rather reinterpreted constructively

¹⁴⁶ Chukwudebelu and Molokwu, "African Contextual Theology," 23.

¹⁴⁷ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 105–108.

¹⁴⁸ Ekeke and Ekpenyong, "Comparative Study of Eschatology," 6.

¹⁴⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 72–75.

within the light of Scripture and Christian doctrine¹⁵⁰. This shift reflects a growing recognition that African religious categories contain theological resources that can enrich, rather than threaten, biblical faith when carefully evaluated. Previous studies have largely focused on descriptive inculturation, documenting the persistence of ancestral beliefs in Christian communities, cataloging syncretistic practices, or advocating for cultural accommodation¹⁵¹. However, few have moved beyond description to develop a systematic, Christ-centered theological framework that critically evaluates which elements of ancestral cosmology can be redeemed, which must be transformed, and which must be rejected in light of biblical revelation¹⁵². This gap in scholarship leaves pastors, theologians, and lay believers without clear guidance, perpetuating confusion, fear, and theological inconsistency¹⁵³.

This study addresses that gap by proposing a constructive theological framework for reimagining ancestral cosmology within contemporary Nigerian Christianity. It argues that ancestral consciousness, when critically interpreted through biblical revelation and centered on Christ, can function as a theological resource rather than a doctrinal threat. Specifically,

¹⁵⁰ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 61–65.

¹⁵¹ E. Agboada, “Eschatology in African Traditional Religion and African Christianity,” *EHASS Journal* 4, no. 5 (2023): 585–595.

¹⁵² Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 2006), 32–36.

¹⁵³ The significance of this study is threefold. First, it advances African theology by moving beyond descriptive inculturation to propose an interpretive theological model that engages ancestral cosmology critically and constructively. Second, it addresses a pressing pastoral reality in Nigerian Christianity, offering churches, seminaries, and theological educators a framework to help believers reconcile their cultural heritage with Christian faith without compromising biblical truth. Third, it contributes to the broader project of decolonizing theological education in Africa by demonstrating that indigenous worldviews, when subjected to careful theological scrutiny, can enrich rather than distort Christian doctrine (Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Construction: Towards a More Comprehensive Theology* [Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2002], 88–92).

elements such as communal identity, intergenerational solidarity, moral responsibility, and the continuity between the living and the dead can be aligned with Christian doctrines of the communion of saints, the body of Christ, and the resurrection hope¹⁵⁴. Conversely, elements that elevate ancestors to independent mediators, demand fear-based veneration, or attribute autonomous spiritual power to them must be firmly rejected, as they contradict the biblical affirmation of Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5; Heb 9:15)¹⁵⁵.

This study contends that the question is no longer whether ancestral consciousness exists within Nigerian Christianity, but how it should be understood theologically. By engaging ancestral cosmology critically, biblically, and pastorally, Nigerian Christianity can develop a more authentic, integrated, and faithful expression of faith, one that speaks meaningfully to African spiritual questions without surrendering the central truths of the gospel. The following sections examine major theological theories on ancestral cosmology, critique their strengths and limitations, synthesize their insights, and propose a constructive framework tailored to the Nigerian context.

Mbiti's Living-Dead Theory

John Mbiti's contributions to African theology and religious studies remain foundational in understanding the structure of African cosmology and its implications for Christian theology. In his seminal work, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti introduces the concept of the "living-dead" to describe the status of ancestors in African traditional thought¹⁵⁶. According to Mbiti, African ontology is fundamentally communal and relational, extending beyond the visible world to include a

¹⁵⁴ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 63.

¹⁵⁵ Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 34.

¹⁵⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 81–84.

continuous network of beings: God, divinities, spirits, ancestors, the living, and the unborn. Within this framework, death is not an absolute termination but a transition from the visible community to the invisible realm. Those who have recently died, typically within three to four generations, remain actively involved in the affairs of their families and communities. Mbiti terms these individuals the “living-dead,” stressing that they are not dead in the Western sense but continue to participate in the moral, social, and spiritual life of the community through memory, ritual, and ethical expectation¹⁵⁷.

Mbiti's theory rests on three interconnected premises. First, African conceptions of time are event-oriented rather than linear-chronological. Time is measured by relationships, seasons, and communal activities rather than abstract numerical progression¹⁵⁸. This temporal framework allows the living and the dead to coexist in a shared moral and spiritual space. Second, personhood in African thought is inherently relational. An individual's identity is constituted through community ties, and death does not sever these ties but transforms them¹⁵⁹. The living-dead are remembered, honoured, and expected to guide the living, while the living are obligated to maintain moral integrity, perform familial duties, and preserve ancestral legacy. Third, the spiritual world is not a separate metaphysical realm but an integral dimension of everyday life. Illness, fertility, prosperity, and misfortune are often interpreted as indicators of harmony or disruption in the relationship between the living and the invisible community¹⁶⁰.

Mbiti's work was groundbreaking because it challenged Western missionary assumptions that African ancestral beliefs

¹⁵⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 85–92.

¹⁵⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 15–20.

¹⁵⁹ Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 45–48.

¹⁶⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 93–96.

were primitive, superstitious, or inherently incompatible with Christianity¹⁶¹. By demonstrating the logical coherence, moral depth, and communal functionality of African cosmology, Mbiti provided African theologians with a vocabulary to articulate indigenous religious consciousness in academic and ecclesial settings. His insistence that Christianity in Africa must engage rather than ignore the living-dead framework laid the groundwork for contextual theology, inculturation, and post-colonial theological reconstruction¹⁶².

The theological implications of Mbiti's theory are significant. If the living-dead remain active participants in communal life, then Christian doctrines of resurrection, eternal life, and the communion of saints must be articulated in ways that resonate with African relational ontology. Mbiti suggests that Christianity should not demand cultural amnesia but should instead reinterpret African categories through the lens of biblical revelation¹⁶³. This approach acknowledges the value of indigenous religious consciousness while opening it to transformation by the gospel.

Critique of the Living-Dead Theory

Despite its foundational importance, Mbiti's living-dead theory has been subject to rigorous scholarly critique. Kenneth Resane, in his critical reassessment of Mbiti's legacy, argues that while Mbiti's descriptive accuracy is commendable, his theological framework lacks clarity on how ancestral cosmology should be integrated into Christian doctrine without compromising biblical orthodoxy¹⁶⁴. Resane notes that Mbiti's work remains primarily anthropological and philosophical, offering limited Christological or soteriological direction for

¹⁶¹ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 135–140.

¹⁶² Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 62–64.

¹⁶³ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 97–100.

¹⁶⁴ K. T. Resane, "John Mbiti: An African Theologian Fifty Years and Beyond," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 46, no. 1 (2025): 1–9.

churches navigating ancestral consciousness¹⁶⁵. The living-dead concept, while culturally insightful, does not address how Christ fulfils, transforms, or supersedes the ancestral role, leaving a theological gap that pastoral contexts continue to experience¹⁶⁶.

Other scholars have raised similar concerns. John Pobee, while appreciating Mbiti's pioneering work, argues that the living-dead theory risks romanticising African traditional religion by presenting it as a harmonious, static system, whereas in reality, African spirituality is diverse, contested, and often marked by fear, manipulation, and power struggles¹⁶⁷. Pobee argues that not all ancestral interactions are morally neutral or spiritually benign; some traditional practices involve coercion, spiritual violence, or idolatrous mediation, which cannot be uncritically absorbed into Christian theology¹⁶⁸. This critique highlights the need for discernment rather than blanket accommodation.

Lamin Sanneh further complicates Mbiti's framework by arguing that African Christianity's vitality stems not from preserving traditional cosmology but from translating the gospel into African languages and cultural categories¹⁶⁹. Sanneh contends that the gospel's translatability allows it to renew African identity without being captive to it. In this view, Mbiti's emphasis on continuity may underestimate the transformative power of biblical revelation to reorient African spiritual consciousness toward Christ-centered hope¹⁷⁰.

Strengths of Mbiti's theory are undeniable. It provides a culturally grounded ontology that respects African relational identity, challenges Western individualism, and affirms the

¹⁶⁵ Resane, "John Mbiti, 4.

¹⁶⁶ Resane, "John Mbiti," 5.

¹⁶⁷ Pobee, *Toward an African Christology*, 59–62.

¹⁶⁸ Pobee, *Toward an African Christology*, 63–65.

¹⁶⁹ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 142–145.

¹⁷⁰ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 146–150.

moral significance of memory and intergenerational solidarity. Its weakness lies in its descriptive orientation, which stops short of offering a normative theological framework for evaluating ancestral practices in light of Christ's unique mediation. Mbiti's work invites further development rather than final resolution, making it a starting point rather than a conclusion in the theological conversation.

Kwame Bediako's Gospel in African Spiritual World Theory

Kwame Bediako advances the conversation by situating the gospel directly within the African spiritual world, arguing that Christianity in Africa must engage indigenous religious categories rather than bypass them. In *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, Bediako contends that African traditional religion was not a void awaiting Christian filling but a preparatory context in which African peoples already sought God, wrestled with spiritual forces, and developed moral frameworks that could be fulfilled in Christ¹⁷¹. Drawing from Pauline theology (Acts 14:17; 17:26–27), Bediako asserts that God's general revelation in African history and culture provided a bridge for the gospel to enter African consciousness authentically¹⁷².

Bediako's central thesis is that African Christians should not be forced to abandon their cultural memory to become Christians. Instead, the gospel should speak directly to African spiritual questions, fears, and aspirations, transforming rather than erasing indigenous identity. He develops the concept of Christ as the "Supreme Ancestor" or "Proto-Ancestor," who fulfils the mediating, protective, and unifying roles traditionally associated with ancestors while surpassing them in power, holiness, and universality¹⁷³. This Christological model allows

¹⁷¹ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 61-64.

¹⁷² Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 65-68.

¹⁷³ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 70-78.

African believers to retain cultural continuity while reorienting their spiritual allegiance toward Christ.

Bediako's work is profoundly anti-colonial. He critiques Western missionary Christianity for imposing foreign theological categories that alienated African believers from their heritage and fostered spiritual inferiority. By restoring dignity to African religious consciousness, Bediako empowers African theologians to articulate faith from within their own cultural frameworks. His emphasis on the wholeness of life, spiritual integrity, and contextual Christology has inspired a generation of African scholars to pursue decolonial theological education¹⁷⁴.

The theological implications of Bediako's theory are far-reaching. If Christ is the Supreme Ancestor, then African Christians can approach him with the same familial trust, moral accountability, and communal solidarity traditionally directed toward human ancestors. This model bridges the gap between African spirituality and Christian doctrine, offering a coherent framework for integrating cultural memory with biblical faith¹⁷⁵.

Critique of Bediako's Theory

While Bediako's contributions are widely celebrated, scholars have identified several limitations. First, Bediako's defence of African identity, though pastorally valuable, lacks a detailed theological framework for evaluating specific ancestral practices. He affirms cultural continuity but does not provide clear criteria for determining which ancestral beliefs should be retained, transformed, or rejected in light of Scripture. This ambiguity leaves churches vulnerable to syncretism or inconsistent pastoral practices. The researcher argues that

¹⁷⁴ C. J. Kaunda, "Kwame Bediako: A Decolonial Quest to Recover Spirituality of the Wholeness of Life in Theological Education," *Religious Education* 120, no. 2 (2025): 168–170.

¹⁷⁵ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 86–90.

Bediako's optimism about the compatibility of African spirituality and Christianity may overlook the deeply entrenched power structures, fear-based rituals, and spiritual manipulation present in some traditional contexts. Uncritical accommodation can reinforce patriarchal control, spiritual abuse, and theological confusion, particularly in contexts where ancestors are invoked to justify violence, exclusion, or economic exploitation¹⁷⁶.

Second, Bediako's Christological model, while innovative, occasionally blurs the distinction between Christ's unique ontological status and the derivative, created status of human ancestors. Emmanuel Katongole notes that describing Christ as an "ancestor" risks functional reductionism, where Christ is treated as merely the greatest among many spiritual mediators rather than the eternal Son who uniquely reconciles humanity to God¹⁷⁷. This tension requires careful theological navigation to preserve the biblical affirmation of Christ's exclusivity as mediator (1 Tim 2:5) while honouring African relational categories¹⁷⁸.

Despite these critiques, Bediako's work remains invaluable for its pastoral sensitivity, anti-colonial stance, and Christ-centered contextualization. His theory provides a necessary corrective to missionary-era cultural erasure and invites African churches to engage their Spiritual heritage with theological honesty.

Charles Nyamiti's Brother-Ancestor Theory

Charles Nyamiti offers one of the most systematic Christological responses to ancestral cosmology. In *Christ as Our Ancestor*, Nyamiti proposes that Christ fulfils the traditional ancestor role while transcending it, functioning as the "Brother-Ancestor"

¹⁷⁶ Maluleke, "African Christianity," 54–60.

¹⁷⁷ Emmanuel Katongole, *Who Are My People? Christianity, Violence, and the Social Roots of War* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2001), 112–115.

¹⁷⁸ Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 35–37.

who mediates divine life, moral guidance, and communal unity¹⁷⁹. Nyamiti's model is deeply rooted in Catholic theological tradition, drawing from the doctrines of the communion of saints, the hypostatic union, and the paschal mystery. He argues that Christ, as fully divine and fully human, uniquely bridges the visible and invisible realms, making him the ultimate ancestor who gathers all believers into one spiritual family¹⁸⁰.

Nyamiti's theory addresses several theological concerns. First, it preserves Christ's uniqueness as mediator while affirming the communal function of ancestors. Rather than placing Christ alongside ancestors, Nyamiti positions him as their fulfilment and surpassing reality¹⁸¹. Second, it aligns African relational ontology with Pauline ecclesiology, where believers are united in the body of Christ across time and space. Third, it provides a doctrinal framework for evaluating ancestral practices: those that promote moral responsibility, familial solidarity, and reverence for life can be integrated, while those that demand fear, autonomous mediation, or spiritual coercion must be rejected¹⁸².

Nyamiti's work is significant because it moves beyond descriptive anthropology to constructive theology. By connecting African cosmology directly to Christology, he offers churches a clear doctrinal boundary for engaging ancestral consciousness without compromising biblical orthodoxy¹⁸³.

Critique of Charles Nyamiti's Brother-Ancestor Theory

Despite its theological rigour, Nyamiti's theory has been critiqued for its limited contextual applicability. His framework is heavily influenced by East African Catholic theology and may

¹⁷⁹ Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 32–34.

¹⁸⁰ Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 32–48.

¹⁸¹ Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 35–37.

¹⁸² Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 50–63.

¹⁸³ Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 65–68.

not fully address the diverse religious landscape of Nigeria, particularly the dominant Pentecostal and evangelical traditions¹⁸⁴. Nigerian Christianity is characterised by dynamic spiritual warfare narratives, deliverance ministries, and charismatic expressions that often frame ancestral consciousness through the lens of demonic oppression rather than communal continuity¹⁸⁵. Nyamiti's model, while doctrinally sound, does not adequately engage these lived realities, leaving pastors and believers without practical theological guidance¹⁸⁶.

Additionally, some scholars argue that Nyamiti's reliance on Catholic sacramental and ecclesial categories may not resonate with Protestant or independent church contexts that underline personal conversion, biblical authority, and direct spiritual experience¹⁸⁷. Ogbu Kalu observes that Nigerian Pentecostalism's rapid growth is partly due to its ability to address spiritual fear, illness, and economic crisis through charismatic ministry, a dimension that systematic Christological models often overlook¹⁸⁸.

Strengths of Nyamiti's theory include its doctrinal clarity, Christocentric focus, and systematic integration of African communal values with Christian soteriology. Its weakness lies in its regional specificity and limited engagement with Nigerian ecclesial diversity. The theory requires contextual adaptation to remain pastorally relevant in Nigeria's multi-faith, multi-cultural, and charismatically vibrant Christian landscape.

Laurenti Magesa's Values for Ethical and Communal Life

Laurenti Magesa shifts the theological conversation from cosmology and Christology to ethics and communal formation.

¹⁸⁴ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 120–125.

¹⁸⁵ Worldviews, "Pentecostalism, Indigenous Cosmology," 150–153.

¹⁸⁶ Ekeke and Ekpenyong, "Comparative Study of Eschatology," 7–8.

¹⁸⁷ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 78–80.

¹⁸⁸ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 130–135.

In *What is Not Sacred?* Magesa argues that African spirituality contains profound moral values that can illuminate Christian ethics and communal life. He avers solidarity, memory, responsibility, and the sacredness of life as core African spiritual principles that resonate with biblical teachings. Magesa contends that African religion is not merely about ritual or spirit mediation but about sustaining moral order, fostering intergenerational harmony, and promoting communal well-being¹⁸⁹.

Magesa's ethical framework challenges the reduction of African spirituality to superstition or demonology. He demonstrates how traditional concepts like *ubuntu* (humanity toward others), *omoluabi* (Yoruba moral character), and *ezi uche* (Igbo wisdom and integrity) align with Christian virtues of love, justice, humility, and service. By highlighting these values, Magesa provides churches with a positive theological resource for character formation, conflict resolution, and social justice¹⁹⁰.

Theologically, Magesa's work underscores that African spirituality is not anti-Christian but can be a partner in moral renewal. His emphasis on ethical continuity allows churches to engage ancestral consciousness without compromising doctrinal integrity, focusing instead on how cultural values can be baptized into Christian discipleship¹⁹¹.

Magesa's Critique

Magesa's ethical focus, while pastorally valuable, has been critiqued for its limited theological depth. Mercy Amba Oduyoye notes that Magesa's emphasis on moral values often bypasses doctrinal questions about salvation, Christ's uniqueness, and the nature of spiritual mediation¹⁹². Ethics alone cannot resolve

¹⁸⁹ Laurenti Magesa, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 54–65.

¹⁹⁰ Magesa, *What is Not Sacred?*, 70–85.

¹⁹¹ Magesa, *What is Not Sacred?*, 90–95.

¹⁹² Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 82–85.

the theological tension between ancestral veneration and biblical monotheism; a robust Christological and soteriological framework is necessary¹⁹³.

Furthermore, Jesse Mugambi argues that Magesa's model risks moralism, where African Christianity becomes focused on ethical behavior rather than transformative grace¹⁹⁴. Without grounding ethics in the gospel's redemptive narrative, churches may inadvertently promote works-based righteousness or cultural conformity rather than Spirit-led transformation¹⁹⁵.

Strengths of Magesa's theory include its emphasis on communal ethics, moral responsibility, and the positive potential of African spirituality. Its weakness lies in its under-theologized approach, which does not fully address Christological mediation, biblical revelation, or doctrinal boundaries.

Valid Nigerian Ancestral Consciousness

Within the Nigerian context, ancestral consciousness remains a living reality, shaping how Christians navigate identity, crisis, and spiritual power. Recent studies highlight the persistence of ancestral frameworks in Igbo, Yoruba, and other ethnic Christian communities, where church attendance coexists with traditional rituals, dream interpretation, and family-based spiritual obligations¹⁹⁶. Nigerian Pentecostalism has responded by reframing ancestral consciousness through spiritual warfare, deliverance, and prophetic ministry, often identifying ancestral spirits as demonic forces requiring exorcism¹⁹⁷. While this approach addresses spiritual fear, it frequently lacks

¹⁹³ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 88–90.

¹⁹⁴ Mugambi, *From Liberation to Construction*, 95–98.

¹⁹⁵ Mugambi, *From Liberation to Construction*, 100–105.

¹⁹⁶ Chukwudebelu and Molokwu, "African Contextual Theology," 24–26.

¹⁹⁷ Worldviews, "Pentecostalism, Indigenous Cosmology," 152–155.

theological nuance, reducing complex cultural realities to binary spiritual battles¹⁹⁸.

A constructive theological framework must navigate between total rejection and uncritical acceptance. Christ remains the sole mediator (1 Tim 2:5), the fulfilment of ancestral hopes, and the centre of communal identity. Elements of ancestral thought that promote solidarity, moral responsibility, intergenerational memory, and reverence for life can be aligned with the communion of saints and the body of Christ¹⁹⁹. Conversely, elements that elevate ancestors to independent mediators, demand fear-based rituals, or attribute autonomous spiritual power must be rejected as incompatible with biblical revelation²⁰⁰.

Nigerian churches must develop safe spaces for theological dialogue, integrate African cosmology into seminary curricula, and cultivate Christ-centered pastoral models that honor cultural identity without compromising gospel truth²⁰¹. This approach ensures that ancestral consciousness becomes a theological resource rather than a doctrinal threat, fostering a Nigerian Christianity that is both authentically African and faithfully Christian.

Christocentric Hermeneutics: Reorienting Ancestral Memory toward Biblical Revelation

The theological engagement with ancestral cosmology in Nigerian Christianity cannot remain merely anthropological or sociological; it must be subjected to a rigorous Christocentric hermeneutic that evaluates indigenous spiritual categories in light of biblical revelation. While Mbiti, Bediako, Nyamiti, and Magesa have each provided indispensable frameworks for

¹⁹⁸ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 140–145.

¹⁹⁹ Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 70–73.

²⁰⁰ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 92–95.

²⁰¹ Mugambi, *From Liberation to Construction*, 110–115.

understanding African religious consciousness, the critical task ahead is to determine how Scripture, particularly its Christological and soteriological centre, reorients, fulfils, or corrects ancestral paradigms. The biblical narrative does not simply dismiss African relational ontology; rather, it transposes it into a redemptive key where Christ becomes the ultimate mediator, the firstborn from the dead, and the head of a new covenantal community that transcends ethnic and temporal boundaries²⁰².

At the heart of this hermeneutical project lies the biblical doctrine of mediation. First Timothy 2:5 declares unequivocally that “there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.” This text does not merely assert numerical singularity; it establishes ontological and functional exclusivity in Christ’s priestly and prophetic office. Hebrews further develops this theme by contrasting the Levitical priesthood and earthly sanctuary with Christ’s eternal, once-for-all sacrifice and heavenly intercession (Heb 7:23–28; 9:11–15). When Nigerian Christians navigate ancestral cosmology, the biblical witness demands that any spiritual practice or theological formulation that elevates human ancestors to independent mediators, autonomous intercessors, or fear-inducing spiritual authorities must be firmly rejected. Emmanuel Katongole observes that when African churches uncritically absorb ancestral mediation frameworks, they risk reproducing a spiritual economy of debt, fear, and coercion that contradicts the gospel’s declaration of grace and reconciled access to God (Rom 5:1–2; Eph 2:18)²⁰³.

Yet rejection alone is insufficient. The biblical tradition also affirms the continuity of covenantal memory, the communion of saints, and the hope of bodily resurrection, all of which resonate

²⁰² Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 74–76.

²⁰³ Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 112–115.

deeply with African ancestral consciousness. N.T. Wright argues that the New Testament resurrection hope is not a Platonic escape from the material world but a robust affirmation of embodied life redeemed and restored within God's renewed creation²⁰⁴. This resurrection hope transforms the African understanding of the "living-dead" from a state of lingering presence sustained primarily by ritual memory into a forward-looking participation in Christ's victory over death. The ancestors, in this reimagined framework, are not abandoned but are seen as fellow pilgrims whose final destiny is secured only in Christ. Richard Bauckham notes that the early Christian doctrine of the communion of saints was never conceived as a parallel spiritual hierarchy but as a single family gathered around Christ, where the living and the dead share in one liturgical and eschatological reality²⁰⁵.

Scholarly debate on this point reveals significant divergence. Lamin Sanneh argues that the gospel's translatability allows it to absorb African categories of memory, lineage, and spiritual continuity without compromising biblical orthodoxy²⁰⁶. For Sanneh, African Christianity's vitality stems precisely from its ability to speak the gospel in indigenous conceptual languages, including those shaped by ancestral consciousness. Conversely, Paul Gifford cautions against romanticizing African spiritual frameworks, noting that many traditional ancestral practices are embedded in structures of spiritual coercion, economic exploitation, and patriarchal control that the gospel explicitly confronts²⁰⁷. Gifford's critique is particularly relevant to Nigerian Pentecostal contexts, where deliverance ministries

²⁰⁴ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 145–148.

²⁰⁵ Richard Bauckham, "The Communion of Saints," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 412–415.

²⁰⁶ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 138–142.

²⁰⁷ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 89–93.

often frame ancestral consciousness through binary spiritual warfare, reducing complex cultural realities to demonic oppression. While Gifford correctly identifies the dangers of uncritical accommodation, his analysis sometimes overlooks the pastoral reality that many Nigerian Christians turn to ancestral frameworks not out of idolatry but out of unresolved grief, familial obligation, and the absence of theologically robust pastoral care.

A balanced Christocentric hermeneutic must therefore navigate between these extremes. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu demonstrates that African Christianity thrives when it acknowledges the spiritual realities Africans experience while submitting them to Christ's lordship²⁰⁸. He argues that the church should not demand cultural amnesia but should instead provide doctrinal clarity that reorients ancestral memory toward Christ's resurrection, the hope of the communion of saints, and the ethical demands of the kingdom. This approach aligns with Jesse N.K. Mugambi's reconstruction theology, which insists that African Christianity must move beyond reactive apologetics and instead constructively engage indigenous worldviews through a gospel-centered ethical and theological vision²⁰⁹. Mugambi's strength lies in his insistence that African theology must be constructive rather than merely defensive; however, his framework occasionally underplays the necessity of sharp doctrinal boundaries when ancestral practices directly contradict biblical monotheism or Christ's exclusive mediation.

Theologically, a Christocentric hermeneutic for ancestral cosmology must accomplish three tasks. First, it must affirm the value of communal memory, intergenerational solidarity, and moral responsibility as gifts of general revelation that can

²⁰⁸ Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 156–160.

²⁰⁹ Jesse N.K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), 72–75.

be baptized into Christian discipleship. Second, it must clearly distinguish between honoring ancestors as remembered members of the human family and venerating them as spiritual mediators, a distinction that preserves biblical monotheism while respecting African relational identity. Third, it must center pastoral and liturgical life on Christ's finished work, ensuring that prayers, memorial practices, and crisis interventions are directed toward the one who alone bridges heaven and earth. When Nigerian churches adopt this hermeneutical posture, ancestral cosmology ceases to be a theological threat and becomes a catalyst for deeper biblical reflection, richer ecclesial identity, and more authentic African Christian witness.

Pastoral Strategies for Ancestral Consciousness in Nigerian Ecclesial Life

Theological clarity alone cannot resolve the lived tension Nigerian Christians experience between inherited ancestral consciousness and ecclesial teaching. The Nigerian church, particularly in its Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical expressions, has developed a spectrum of pastoral responses to ancestral cosmology, ranging from aggressive deliverance ministries to cautious inculturation initiatives. Yet many of these responses remain fragmented, emotionally driven, or theologically inconsistent, leaving believers to navigate spiritual questions in isolation. A robust pastoral strategy must therefore be grounded in ecclesial wisdom, psychological sensitivity, and doctrinal fidelity, creating spaces where ancestral concerns can be addressed openly without compromising the gospel.

Ogbu Kalu's ethnographic and theological studies of African Pentecostalism reveal that spiritual warfare rhetoric and deliverance practices have become the dominant pastoral framework for addressing ancestral consciousness in Nigeria²¹⁰.

²¹⁰ Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 102–105.

Kalu documents how Pentecostal pastors frequently interpret illness, infertility, financial failure, and recurring misfortune as manifestations of ancestral curses or demonic territorial control. While this approach resonates with many Nigerians' lived experiences of spiritual anxiety, Kalu notes that it often lacks pastoral nuance, reducing complex familial, psychological, and socio-economic realities to purely spiritual battles. The result is a pastoral culture that can foster fear, secrecy, and spiritual exhaustion, as believers are repeatedly instructed to break generational curses without receiving adequate biblical teaching on grace, resurrection hope, or the sufficiency of Christ's priesthood²¹¹.

In contrast, mainline and historic mission churches have often adopted a more cautious approach, emphasizing liturgical continuity, catechetical formation, and the gradual transformation of cultural practices through Christian education. However, as Mercy Amba Oduyoye observes, this approach frequently avoids direct engagement with ancestral consciousness, treating it as a private family matter rather than a public theological concern²¹². Oduyoye's critique highlights a significant pastoral weakness: when churches refuse to name and address ancestral spirituality openly, believers are forced to maintain double religious lives, publicly confessing Christ while privately managing spiritual fears through traditional means. This pastoral avoidance not only fractures ecclesial integrity but also perpetuates the very syncretism it seeks to avoid.

A third emerging approach, advocated by several contemporary Nigerian theologians, emphasizes the creation of safe pastoral spaces for theological dialogue, memory integration, and ritual reinterpretation. This model draws from the early church's practice of catechumenal formation, where converts were not

²¹¹ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 118–121.

²¹² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 85–88.

merely instructed to abandon their past but were gradually guided to reinterpret their cultural narratives through the lens of Christ's death and resurrection. Nigerian churches should develop structured pastoral counseling frameworks that address grief, familial obligation, and spiritual fear without resorting to either demonisation or uncritical accommodation. This approach requires pastors to be trained in both biblical theology and African cultural anthropology, enabling them to discern which ancestral practices reflect legitimate moral and communal values and which cross into idolatry or spiritual manipulation.

Scholarly consensus on this pastoral challenge remains divided but increasingly convergent. Asamoah-Gyadu insists that Pentecostal deliverance ministries, despite their excesses, address a real pastoral need: the human desire for spiritual protection and liberation from fear²¹³. He argues that the church should not abandon deliverance practices but should instead ground them in robust biblical exegesis, psychological counselling, and ecclesial accountability. Gifford, conversely, warns that deliverance rhetoric often becomes a commodity in Nigerian megachurches, where spiritual warfare is packaged as a repeatable transaction rather than a journey of discipleship²¹⁴. Both scholars agree, however, that the Nigerian church must move beyond reactive pastoral models toward intentional theological formation that equips believers to navigate ancestral consciousness with clarity, hope, and communal support.

A constructive pastoral strategy for Nigerian Christianity must therefore include four interrelated components. First, seminaries and theological institutions must integrate African cosmology, cultural anthropology, and pastoral counselling into their curricula, ensuring that future pastors are equipped to address ancestral concerns with theological precision and

²¹³ Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*, 162–165.

²¹⁴ Gifford, *African Christianity*, 95–98.

cultural sensitivity. Second, local churches should establish dedicated pastoral care teams trained to guide believers through grief, familial crises, and spiritual anxiety without resorting to fear-based deliverance or silent tolerance. Third, liturgical practices should be thoughtfully adapted to honor memory and communal solidarity while clearly directing worship, prayer, and intercession toward Christ alone. Memorial services, for instance, can be restructured to celebrate the lives of departed believers within the hope of resurrection, rather than invoking them as spiritual intermediaries. Fourth, ecclesial leadership must foster open dialogue around ancestral consciousness, normalising it as a legitimate pastoral concern rather than a hidden shame. When churches adopt this posture, they create an environment where believers can bring their full cultural and spiritual questions into the light of the gospel, experiencing healing without compromise.

The pastoral navigation of ancestral consciousness in Nigeria is not merely a matter of ritual adjustment; it is a test of the church's theological maturity and ecclesial integrity. By combining Christocentric hermeneutics with intentional pastoral strategy, Nigerian Christianity can move beyond the false dichotomy of total rejection and uncritical acceptance. The result will be a church that speaks meaningfully to African spiritual questions, honors the depth of indigenous identity, and remains faithfully anchored in the unique sufficiency of Christ.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that ancestral cosmology remains a vibrant reality within contemporary Nigerian Christianity, shaping how believers interpret identity, crisis, and spiritual power. While churches have responded through rejection or accommodation, both approaches lack theological coherence. By engaging the works of Mbiti, Bediako, Nyamiti, and Magesa, this study has proposed a constructive framework that critically

evaluates ancestral consciousness in light of Scripture, centers it on Christ, and distinguishes between redeemable and rejectable elements. Nigerian Christianity can become more authentic and faithful by speaking meaningfully to African spiritual questions without compromising the uniqueness of Christ and the sufficiency of biblical revelation. The study recommends seminary curriculum reform, open pastoral dialogue, Christ-centered theological models, and further research on Pentecostal spirituality and ancestral consciousness. Ultimately, African worldviews need not be obstacles to Christian faith but can become resources for a genuinely Nigerian expression of the gospel.

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