

CHRISTIAN SERVICE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

**THE DOCTRINE OF TRINITY IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY: AN
ECUMENIC CRITIC OF CHARLES NYAMITY ANCESTRAL TRINITY**

BY

LAWRENCE OTU NYARKO

(60000228)

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF GRADUATE
STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN CHRISTIAN
MINISTRY WITH MANAGEMENT**

JULY, 2017

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this Long Essay has been prepared by myself, that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a degree, that the work is a record of what has been done by myself, that all quotations have been distinguished by either quotation marks or indentation and all the sources of information have specifically been acknowledged by means of footnotes.

Signed: Date:
Lawrence Otu-Nyarko
(Student)

Signed: Date:
Dr. Robert Owusu Agyarko
(Supervisor)

Signed: Date:
Dr. S. B. Adubofour
(Head of Department of Theology)

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Almighty God for his guidance, unfailing love and providential care. Also, my wife Doris Otu-Nyarko for her support, encouragement and understanding. Then to our six children, Lawrence, Priscilla, Ernest, Bernice, Samuel and Eunice for their support and understanding and to The Church of Pentecost and all lecturers of CSUC.

ABSTRACT

This work is an analysis of the African interpretation of the doctrine of Trinity and its relationship with the ecumenical formulation of the subject. Special reference is made to Charles Nyamiti's Trinitarian proposal. While a number of other African Trinitarian proposals would be explored, the focus of this study is on the formulation of Nyamiti's Ancestral Trinity. In this work the researcher intends to make a historical survey of the discussions and conclusions of the Ecumenical Fathers on the doctrine of Trinity. It will be followed by a sequence of critical analyses of the African interpretation in order to appreciate the convergence and divergence of the ecumenical formulation of Trinity and that of African theologians with particular reference to Charles Nyamiti. The intention in this work is to examine Nyamiti's Ancestral Trinity within African context, bringing to the fore how it converges and diverges from the traditional orthodox position on the Trinity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents	Pages
Title Page	i
Declaration	ii
Dedication	iii
Abstract	iv
Table of Contents	v

CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Statement of Problem	3
1.3 Research Questions	4
1.4 Objectives	4
1.5 Methodology	4
1.6 Significance	5
1.7 The Scope of the Study	5
1.8 Organization of the Study	5

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction	7
2.2 The Trinity and African Worldviews	7
2.3 The Trinity and the African Family	9
2.4 The Trinity and <i>Ujamaa</i> – Communal Life of Sharing	10
2.5 Communitarian Divinity	12
2.6 Onyamebaasafua	14

CHAPTER THREE: TRADITIONAL AFRICAN CONCEPT OF GOD	
3.1 Introduction	17
3.2 The Structure of the Traditional Africa Worldview: The Idea of God	17
3.3 The Supreme Being in African as the God of Christianity?	23
3.4 Conclusion	30
CHAPTER FOUR: THE ECUMENICAL DOCTRINE OF TRINITY	
4.1 Introduction	31
4.2 The Development of the Doctrine of Trinity: Ecumenical Councils on Trinity	32
4.3 Explanation of Terms	38
4.4 Misconceptions about the Trinity (Trinitarian Heresies)	42
4.5 Conclusion	43
CHAPTER FIVE: CHARLES NYAMITI'S ANCESTRAL TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY	
5.1 Introduction	44
5.2 A Brief Biography Charles Nyamiti	44
5.3 Inculturation: Nyamiti's Approach to Theology	45
5.4 Concept of Ancestor as Basis of Nyamiti's Trinitarian Theology	46
5.5 Conclusion	52
CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON	
6.1 Introduction	54
6.2 The Necessity of African Trinity	54
6.3 Nyamiti's Ancestral Trinity and Ecumenical Doctrine of Trinity: Comparison	58
6.4 Conclusion	63
BIBLIOGRAPHY	65

CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The general character of the western missionary teaching and preaching in African since the arrival of missionaries on our continent has generated serious issues that has caught the attention of many contemporary scholars. Key among such issues is the fact that the presentation of Christianity was shrouded in the European cultures and traditions. Bediako laments that the reception and articulation of the Christian faith was often restricted to the models of Christian traditions of the Europe with little or no regards for the worldview, culture and traditions of the Africans.¹ It is in this light that Pobee remarked that, the ideas and idioms used in the Nicene Creed, which was expanded in the council of Constantinople as the plumb line of orthodoxy are unfamiliar to us today. He attributes this to the fact that the creed was an attempt of a predominantly Hellenistic society to articulate its belief in Jesus in its own language and concepts. He further elaborates that the use of words like substance, person, and hypostasis among other metaphysical speculations as only relevant and rooted in the Greeco-Roman Culture and not that of the African.² The concern of these scholars like Pobee, Bediako, Appiah-Kubi, and Nyamiti among others is not the faith behind the creed but the language and concepts used in its articulation and presentation.

It is this concerns that has motivated the rise of African theologies. The emphasis on contextualisation in African theological discourse has led to the emergence of different forms of African Theology. One may identify especially Liberation

¹ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 125.

² John Samuel Pobee, *Towards an African Theology* (Nashville: Abington, 1979), 9, 82.

Theology, Inculturation Theology and Reconstruction Theology. African Women's Theology may be regarded as a distinct type of theology, but is often included under the rubric of Liberation Theologies. Liberation Theology approaches African economic and political struggles from a theological perspective.

African Christology has become the central issue of theological endeavor on the African continent. African theologians have published more on Christology than any other subject. Recently publications on Pneumatology have increased considerably. However, same cannot be said of the doctrine of the Trinity. Interestingly, if Christ is truly God as well as truly human (as affirmed in the Nicene Creed) and the Holy Spirit is divine, theological inquiry on these doctrines naturally has to proceed to the doctrine of the Trinity. Notwithstanding the necessity of holding Christology, Pneumatology and Trinity together, a Trinitarian based Christology and Pneumatology are less articulated in African theological discourses.

In African Christological and Pneumatological discourses, the socio-economic concerns take precedence over the theological affirmations. Thus, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are presented to the Africans more on the basis of what they can do and are doing, without taking any due regard to their distinctive natures in the Godhead. It is on the basis of this challenge that Jean-Marc Ela insists that we do not know what we believe unless we express it in our own language. Ela therefore insists that African Church must re-hear everything previously spoken about God and God's revelation to people at all times, in all languages, and in all cultures.³

One of the most notable attempts in solving this dilemma is Charles Nyamiti's Ancestral Christology. This study may be labelled as inculturational theology as it

³Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 164.

discusses ecumenical doctrine of Trinity in the African context. The inculturation approach seeks to integrate the Christian faith with African cultural life and thought forms.⁴ Such a theology encourages African Christians to critically reflect on the doctrine of Trinity from within the African context, as is not only needed but is a logical outcome of African Christologies which has occupied the attention of many African theologians.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The need for an articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity from the African context as the basis of African Christology and Pneumatology hold a major challenge for African Christian theologians.⁵ For Mugambi, the notion of the Trinity is not clearly expressed in African Christianity. He notes that, at least in practice, many African Christians identify Jesus with the Holy Spirit and make no distinction between God, Jesus and the third Person of the Trinity. Both Mbiti and Bediako affirmed incidences of such a theological blunder in contemporary African Christian theology.⁶ It therefore critical to consider the immense contribution of scholars like Charles Nyamiti as they proposed some solutions to this dilemma. However, any attempt to solve this dilemma must not deviate from orthodoxy. Whatever theologies we developed in Africa should be tested against the plumb line of the biblical faith. Therefore this study examines the Trinitarian construct of Charles Nyamiti to bring to the fore how it converges amid diverges from the Ecumenical position.

1.3 Research Questions

⁴ Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 74-78.

⁵ Mika Vähäkangas, *African approaches to the Trinity: African Theological Journal* (2000), 23, 33-50.

⁶ J.N.K. Mugambi, *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi: Longman Kenya Ltd, 1989), 5053.

In what forms does Charles Nyamiti's Ancestral Trinitarian theology converged and diverged from the traditional (Ecumenical) definition of Trinity?

1.4 Objectives

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- a) To find out where Charles Nyamiti's Ancestral Trinitarian Theology converged and diverged from the Ecumenical Confessions on Trinity.
- b) To explore the African contribution to contextual Trinitarian discourse.

1.5 Methodology

The study is basically a conceptual analysis. The sources of data will be secondary data from journal publications, books as well as other internet sources. This study uses critical comparative method to examine the views of Charles Nyamiti and the Ecumenical stance of the doctrine of the Trinity. These materials are examined and presented in four steps. Firstly, the concept of God in traditional Africa religion is described. Secondly, the traditional (ecumenical) Christian view of the doctrine of Trinity is also described. Thirdly, the researcher draws on the publications of Charles Nyamiti on Trinity and other related works. The publications of Nyamiti's critics on Ancestral Trinitarian theology and other related works are also used to find out the strengths and the weakness of Nyamiti's proposal. Fourthly, the researcher compares and contrasts Nyamiti's Ancestral Trinitarian theology with the Ecumenical notion of Trinity to find out where they converged and diverged.

1.6 Significance

The emergence of African reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity is not only needed; it is a logical outcome of the African theological reflections on Christology and Pneumatology⁷. Findings from this study will therefore help to link African Christology and Pneumatology proposals with other Christian doctrines.

1.7 The Scope of the Study

The study is limited to the exploration of Charles Nyamiti's articulation of Trinity in African context. Although several African Trinitarian proposals are reviewed but the focus of this study is on Ancestral Trinitarian theology as articulated by Charles Nyamiti.

1.8 Organization of the Study

The study is organized in six main chapters. Chapter one is the general overview of the study which includes an introduction, problem statement, objectives, scope of the study and methodology of the study and discourse on the doctrine of Trinity from an African perspective. Chapter two reviews available literature on the trinity in African context. The third chapter describes the traditional African concept of God. Chapter four discusses the Ecumenical doctrine of Trinity and its historical background. Chapter five discusses Charles Nyamiti's Trinitarian theology while chapter five entails the similarities and dissimilarities between the two views. It also elaborates on the findings from the study, assesses their theological implications and makes recommendations to inform future studies and constructions of Trinitarian theology. The last chapter concludes the study with a summary of findings, a general conclusion and recommendations.

⁷Vähäkangas, *African approaches to the Trinity*, 34-35.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the various approaches to Trinity from within African context. Many of the African doctrinal theology deal with Christology and few on Trinity. The reason behind this is that the vocabulary of the doctrine of the Trinity is said to be foreign for African thinking. Trinitarian theology was introduced as an entirely new way of thinking and believing in God, thus was difficult to be translated not only into African languages, but non Africans as well.

However, some few African theologians have attempted to prove that Africans are also capable to reflect on abstract things. Section 2.2 focuses on a proposal of Trinity and African worldview. Section 2.3 discusses Trinity and African family Ujamaa from East African context. Section 2.4 Trinity Ujamaa from East African context. Section 2.5 also discusses a proposal of *Nyamebaasakro* from Akan, West African Context. Section 2.6 concludes the chapter.

2.2 The Trinity and African Worldviews

The earliest form of trinitarian theory based on the African relational worldview can be found on Vincent Mulago's dissertation of the early 1960s. Mulago's dissertation was on ecclesiology and thus the question of the Trinity remained relatively peripheral. However, all material that would have been needed for Mulago's later elaboration of Trinity from within African context is found to be already present in his earlier work.

In his submission, Mulago moves from the philosophical heights of Bantu cosmology to the common analogy between the Trinity and family/human communality

According to Vähäkangas, Mugalo's trinitarian view must be seen mostly as little more than a presentation of the Augustinian mutual love theory in which the concept of substance is replaced with life.⁸

A promising treatment of the Trinity was Mugalo's development of Temples' ideas of vital force into an idea of vital participation. For Mugalo, vital participation can be applied directly to the trinitarian relations and the constitution of being-in-the-world. In fact, later Mugalo worked briefly on this issue. Nyamiti's view comes close to those of Mugalo concerning the Bantu traditional worldview and Mugalo's influence on Nyamiti seems probable.

Another African theologian who has worked on Trinity from African worldview is Efoe Julien Penoukou from the Togolese Ewe-Mina ethnic group. Penoukou analyzes some of Ewe-Mina myths as basis to build a relevant Christology. As a by-product, he has also elaborated on the Trinity to a limited extent.

Unlike most other African theologians dealing with the doctrine of the Trinity, Penoukou does not begin from the traditional or ecumenical concept of the subject matter. Rather, his point of departure is the Bible. He then attempts to adapt the notion of trinity, strictly from the Bible, to an African reality. The concrete outcome, however, does not go further than concluding that God being a communion of three is in accord with the Ewe-Mina conception of being.

However, this conclusion is carried somewhat further by indicating that speculation about God's essence is not fruitful, but that one should rather concentrate on finding

⁸Vähäkangas, *African approaches to the Trinity*, 45-49.

out how the triune God communicates Himself to us. He notes that, the triune God turned in on Himself would not fulfill the ideal of communal being since the communion would ultimately be a closed one.

A hint toward the possibility to use an African worldview for elaborating the Trinity in a way other than that of communality or relationality is made by Egbulefu who mentions that “the God one and three is the God of equilibrium.” This statement reflects the tendency of many African cultures (just like many other archaic cultures) to seek an equilibrium. In this view, consensus is of great importance and harmony is the central characteristic of the cosmos. Egbulefu does not proceed in a trinitarian direction in dealing with the idea of equilibrium. Also this possibility remains only on the level of a hint toward an African approach to the Trinity.⁹

2.3 The Trinity and the African Family

The concept of family has become a basis for African Trinitarian speculation. In traditional Africa, family usually means the extended family, or clan. In African theological discourses, family is usually connected with the church. The image of the Church as family and the Trinity comes from the Roman Catholic tradition. For African Catholic Bishops, Trinity is the basis and the model for the unity of the Church and human community as whole. This model does not concentrate on the number of persons but rather on the Holy Spirit as the bond of unity between the Father and the Son.

In this proposal, African concepts of family are projected as the standard criterion to understanding of the Trinity. The Trinitarian model is used to influence African

⁹Vähäkangas, *African approaches to the Trinity*, 45-49.

models of family. The primary view, however, is the African family that should reflect the Trinitarian communion.

John O. Egbulefu's proposal suggests the connection between family and the Trinitarian community. In his model, the number three gains a more special importance and the scope is shifted from the relations in an extended family to those of the nuclear family, i.e., family as understood in the West. Egbulefu draws a social analogy of the Trinity to family. For him, God contains all good things and every good thing bears the imprint of the divine inner life. This means that in a family, there are some marks of inner-trinitarian communions. Egbulefu does not go into details in building this analogy. His observations mostly remain as hints as to how he would like to see the family-concept to be used in discussing the Trinity.

2.4 The Trinity and *Ujamaa* – Communal Life of Sharing

Ujamaa is a special case of an African understanding of family. The Swahili word *jamaa* means (extended) family. The term belongs to the basic vocabulary of Swahili language. The derivative *ujamaa* (familyhood) belongs predominantly to political rhetoric. The father and champion of *ujamaa*-politics was Julius Nyerere, the first head of state of independent Tanganyika/Tanzania and a devout Catholic.

Ujamaa, in his reckoning, was supposed to be the third way between capitalism and socialism, viz., communality within the framework of the extended family. The extended family was still more extended to cover the whole nation. Some theologians greeted Nyerere's idea with enthusiasm; for they considered this new politics to be in line with genuine Christian principles.

The outcome of this new political concept was *ujamaa* theology which, in principle, was “not meant to be a theology of *ujamaa* politics but certain overtones of *ujamaa* politics prevails. However, it was inevitable that this type of theology had a close connection with politics, since already the name was taken from political language. Some *ujamaa* theological writings became little more than political euphoria in the guise of theology. However, in the cases in which the writer was competent and prudent enough to work within the framework of *ujamaa*, using the terminology and ideas as an impetus for genuine theologizing. Thus, some writings on *ujamaa* have validity in spite of the fall of *ujamaa* in the political arena.

Catholic bishop Cristopher Mwoleka asserts that he is dedicated to the ideal of Ujamaa because it invites all men to imitate the life of Trinity which is a life of sharing. Mwoleka considers that *ujamaa* could serve Christians in understanding the mystery of the Trinity because in the trinity the question is not of an “intellectual puzzle” but of a concrete life of sharing. Mwoleka, true to his message, does not enter into theological subtleties nor into drawing analogies between the Trinity and *ujamaa*. The emphasis of his Trinitarian model shifted later to ecclesiology.

Another Roman Catholic, Camillus Lyimo, does not contrast intellectual reflection on the Trinity with practical reflection of the Trinity but wants to draw an analogy between the *ujamaa* communality and the communion within the Trinity. Thus, from his point of view, the notion of communal life is not the only correct alternative for a true understanding of the mystery of the Trinity but rather a way which could provide insights for a better intellectual understanding of that mystery. However, the topic of

the Trinity has never been thoroughly examined in the light of *ujamaa*; the *ujamaa* theologians concerns seemed to be a more practical type.¹⁰

Ujamaa, if understood less in connection to a particular political ideology, points toward deep strictures of African traditional thinking, as professor Charles Nyamiti seems to think. For Nyamiti, the point in *ujamaa* is not material development or sharing as such but rather the deeper values or structures of African thinking that *ujamaa* (or at least some given aspect of it) represents. The family is at the center of African life and is thus connected to the axis of the worldview. *Ujamaa*, understood as familyhood in the sense connected to the traditional family, serves as a key deeper into African thought. When Nyamiti combines the notion “union is strength” (*Ujamaaninguvu*) with the Trinity, he does not deal with a political slogan (as it was also used) but with a statement penetrating toward the core of Bantu thought. Instead of *Ujamaapolitics*, Nyamiti finds another approach to the African concept of family more fruitful: that of the ancestors.

2.5 Communitarian Divinity

Okechukwu Ogbonnaya has contributed immensely to the African understanding of the cosmos and God. He has examined the work of Tertullian on Trinity. According to Ogbonnaya, Tertullian’s work was grounded on an *African communal understanding of the Divine and humanity*. The concern of Ogbonnaya is to demonstrate that an African communal understanding of the divine constitutes the basis for two things; namely explaining the meaning of equality, clarifying personal

¹⁰Vähäkangas, *African approaches to the Trinity*, 39-41.

distinction and temporal subordination within community without subjecting differences to ontological inferiority.

The work of Ogbonnaya on trinity is titled *On communitarian divinity: An African interpretation of the Trinity*. He applies his mind to the community (which is the basis of relationships for Africans) and he makes some links with the plurality of God within the Trinity. According to Ogbonnaya ‘communality, relationality and fundamental interconnection underlie the African mode of seeing and being in the world.’¹¹

Ogbonnaya approaches the Trinity from the position of ‘many’, as in community. The challenge he faces is what kind of community to focus on. He picks up the concept of relationship from interacting with other scholars. Ogbonnaya speaks of rural communities where personal relationships are characterised and guided by traditional rules. In the African rural context, there are face-to-face relations that are spontaneous. There are also some who view community as events that join people together, not social groups. Historical events are shared by the community that anticipates a common goal for the future, According to Ogbonnaya individuals may be connected by the spirit via common nature.¹²

For Ogbonnaya the term polytheism seems to define the African understanding of God is divine communalism. By bringing in the concept of communalism, Ogbonnaya attempts to bring an understanding of the relationship amongst the gods and the gods with humanity. Ogbonnaya indicates that plurality is not in opposition to the concept

¹¹Ogbonnaya A., *On communitarian divinity: An African interpretation of the Trinity*, (Paragon House, New York. 1994), 1.

¹²Ogbonnaya, *On communitarian divinity*, 2-13.

of oneness but it is inclusive of all of the gods. He admits that amongst the gods there can be one who seems to take prime position, but whoever, it is must be regarded as part of the many, not in isolation. He says a god does not cease to be of the same nature with other gods, even if that god has been chosen to represent the rest, because one god is inextricably related to the other gods by virtue of a shared divine nature. Africans also accept the concept of oneness but it is in the context of others. For him the oneness is the power which he calls ‘a single all-pervasive power.

For Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, the main idea of trinity is based on “*Community*”, and its relationships. He explains that Divine communalism is the position that the Divine is a community of Supreme Beings who are fundamentally related to one another and ontologically equal while at the same time distinct from one another by their personhood and functions.

2.6 Onyamebaasafua

Agyarko focuses on the necessity and the problem of reinterpreting the doctrine of the Trinity within the African context. *Nyamebaasafua* was outcome of Agyarko’s contextual Christology “*Nyamesofopreko* Christology”,

He argues that if Christ is truly God as well as truly human, then Christological inquiry naturally has to proceed to the doctrine of the Trinity. Notwithstanding the necessity of holding Christology and Trinity together, Agyarko contends that a trinitarian based Christology is yet to be articulated in African theological discourses. With reference to Mugambi, he indicates that the notion of the Trinity is not clearly expressed in African Christianity. He notes that, at least in practice, many African

Christians identify Jesus with the Holy Spirit and make no distinction between God, Jesus and the third Person of the Trinity. Such incidence, Agyarko said is a theological blunder in contemporary African Christian theology.

Agyarko also pointed out that in African Christological discourse, the socio-economic concerns take precedence over the theological affirmations. Thus, Jesus is presented to the Africans more on the basis of what he can do and is doing, without taking any due regard to the nature of his person. In this respect, he advises the need for an articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity as the basis of Christology. In the midst of such a discourse, he offered his trinitarian proposal – as a logical outcome of a *Nyamesofopreko* Christology.

Agyarko's proposal is based on the concept of *Nyamebaasafua*. It literally means: God-three-one. The term entails a literal translation of the Father (*Agya*), Son (*Oba*) and Holy Spirit (*Sunsum Kronkron*). He suggests that the Akan concepts of a person – composition of *Ntoro*, *Okra* and *Sunsum* may be regarded as the triune *Onyame* (God): *Ntoro* as the Father, *Okra* as the Son and *Sunsum* as the Holy Spirit.

According to Agyarko, the advantage his proposal has over the other proposals is that, the three dimensions, *okra*, *sunsum* and *ntoro*, stand at par with each other. Thus, their order of arrangement is arbitrary; the arrangement does not connote any sense of superiority of one over the others.

The Akans do not assign any superiority to any of the three invisible vitalities or interpret them in terms of ontological subordination. Moreover, in terms of gender, *okra* and *sunsum* are described as neuter.¹³

¹³ R. O. Agyarko, *God's Unique Priest (Nyamesopreko): A Christology in Akan Context*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of the Western Cape, South Africa, 2010.

CHAPTER THREE

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN CONCEPT OF GOD

3.1 Introduction

The chapter entails a concept of God in traditional African religion. The importance of such discussions is on the fact that the doctrine of Trinity, which is the focal point of this study, is basically a concept of God. Thus, a discussion of traditional African concept of God will serve as base for this thesis. Section 3.2 entails an overview of the traditional African concept of God. Section 3.3 discusses the question of whether the Supreme Being in Africa is the God of Christianity. Section 3.4 sums up the discussion of the chapter.

3.2 The Structure of the Traditional Africa Worldview: The Idea of God

There are four foundational religious beliefs in the traditional religions: (1) the belief in the Supreme Being.; (2) the belief in lesser divinities and (3) Ancestors (4) the belief in spirits, other beings and impersonal (mystical) power(s). These foundational religious beliefs are essential to our theological interpretation and analysis of the traditional religions.

For Africans, the spirit world is considered to be as real as the world of the living. The spirit and material worlds are linked by a network of mutual relationships and responsibilities. The action of the living, can affect the spirits of the departed, while the support of family ancestors ensures prosperity of the family lineage. Failure to recognize the lesser divinities and the ancestors, it is believed, might spell doom. In

African thought, at both the individual and communal levels, there is a belief that a person is surrounded by a host of spirit beings, some for good, and some for ill.¹⁴

a) The Belief in God

In some African societies the Supreme Being is somehow far off. But many African communities such as the Akans of Ghana, the Mendes of Serra Leone and Yoruba of Nigeria, believe that God is accessible and that He pays heed to the needs and petitions of people. Prayers and petitions addressed directly to God by individuals may be in the form of a libation ritual or casual exclamations. God's name is mentioned or implied in many constantly used phrases in different African languages. Such phrases give the recognition that God is the controller of Destiny, and that things happen according to his wishes. God's name is also invoked when one wakes up and before one goes to sleep.¹⁵

The concept of God as the creator of the world and human beings, and the final authority in all matters, is original to the Africans. This idea is firmly entrenched in the religious beliefs of the African people and it is fundamental to their religious systems. The African people have names for God, which are unlike the names given to other spiritual beings they recognize. These special names express the idea of the uniqueness of God and reflect the attributes given to him.

To the African people, God is essentially a spirit, a being who is invisible to humankind but omnipresent. The invisible nature of God is usually expressed in concrete terms. Among the Akan, He is likened to the wind, which is also invisible

¹⁴P.K. Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspect of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1994), 37.

¹⁵Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspect of Ghanaian Culture*, 11.

and everywhere. He is never represented in the form of images nor worshipped through them. They firmly believe that He is everywhere and can be called upon anywhere. This is in sharp contrast to their concept of the lesser divinities, to whom Africans consecrate numerous shrines and temples.

Africans believe that God is always good and He does no harm to anybody. The lesser divinities and other spirits however lack consistency in their attitude towards human beings. They have a tendency to get angry and they especially resent being neglected by human beings. Thus, to avoid the danger which the anger of the gods could invoke, human beings must sacrifice to them.¹⁶

b) The Belief in Lesser Divinities

The general belief concerning the lesser divinities and spirits in general is that they were directly or indirectly created by God. First, there are the ancient tutelary divinities who belong to the community and who have been worshipped from time immemorial. They are believed to be friendly to the community. Their main function is to protect the community from harm. Among the Asante, they mainly reside in water: rivers, lakes, or streams. The various forms of water are more or less looked upon to contain power based on the spirit of the water that *God* directly created.

The second category of lesser divinities is of a more recent origin. They are physical objects or instruments used in the practice of magic and have been elevated to the status of gods. Usually they belong to the individuals and they operate in the interest

¹⁶Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspect of Ghanaian Culture*, 11.

of the owners who may put them to beneficial, or harmful and destructive use for personal ends. They are believed to hate and kill witches.¹⁷

c) The Spirit of the Earth

Africans generally regard the Earth as a spirit. In the Akan society, she is next to God and is the second deity to be offered a drink at libations. Special days are devoted to her and on those days there is no tilling of the land. The Spirit of the Earth is also offered a sacrifice when a grave is about to be dug. It is firmly believed that all human beings have emerged from the bowels of the Earth and death is a return to the Earth. Before a grave is dug, libation is offered to ask for permission to dig a hole so that a child of *Asase Yaa* may be buried in her womb. This is the explanation given for which drink is poured to the ground for the ancestors.¹⁸

d) The Belief in Spirits

African traditional religion recognizes and accepts the existence of spirits who may use material objects as temporary residence and manifest their presence and action through natural objects and phenomena. Technically, this may fit in the definition of animism.

We make reference to the spirits here as those apparitional entities which form separate categories of beings from those described as lesser divinities. We also distinguish them from the ancestors since they are different from the ancestors. Lesser divinities and ancestors are no doubt spirits. However, lesser divinities and the ancestors could be described as domesticated spirits. The ancestors have always been

¹⁷K.A. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Singapore: F.E.P. International Private, 1978), 55.

¹⁸Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.

part of the human family, and the divinities are intimately a tutelary part of the personal lifestyle or the community set-up.

i) Witches

The Akan concept of witchcraft is based on the belief that the spirits of living human beings can be sent out of the body on errands to cause havoc to other persons in body, mind, or estate. Witches have guilds that operate singly, and the spirits sent out of the human body in this way can act either invisibly or through an animal or a bird.¹⁹

It is generally believed that the guild of witches has their regular meetings and ceremonies at the top of trees or in open places in the middle of the night. The meeting is a meeting of 'souls' or 'spirits' of the witches. Among the Akan, it is believed that the witches assume the form of a particular kind of bird or animal. It is said that, they supply human flesh in turn. They are spirits who operate upon human spirits. Thus, in the case of witches or their victims, spirits meet spirits; spirits operate upon spirits, while the actual human bodies lie asleep in their bed.²⁰

Witches are believed to have the power to cause death, sterility, sickness and misfortunes. The main purpose of the witches is to work havoc to other human beings. The question of the reality of witches must be connected with the problem of evil in general as any evil in Africa is attributed to witches. Thus, until we can unravel the problem of evil, the question of the reality of witchcraft will to a great extent remain a mystery.²¹

ii) Spirits of Trees

¹⁹Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.

²⁰Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.

²¹Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 174.

Africans believe spirits are everywhere; there is no area of the earth, no object or creature which does not have a spirit of its own or which cannot be inhabited by a spirit. Thus, there are spirits of trees, that is, spirits which inhabit trees. There is a distinction between the spirit that is supposed to be in a tree and the tree itself.

iii) Ghost Spirits

It is believed by the Akan that a person, whose dead body is not buried, following the appropriate rites, will not be admitted at the abode of the ancestors. Therefore, the person will become a wanderer, with an aimless, haunting existence. This is also the fate of those who die bad deaths – by suicide or drowning, from bad diseases, or during pregnancy. Since they are accursed, they do not qualify to be ancestors; therefore they will not be accepted in the abode of the blessed. This category of wandering spirits also include those who were wicked while on earth and were therefore excluded from the fellowship of the good. These ghost spirits haunt trees, rocks, rivers and watercourses, or hills.²²

e) The Belief in Ancestors

The most important aspect of African religion is the ancestral cult. The ancestors are always held in deep respect and some think they are even worshipped. After God, the ancestors are next in importance. All other beings may be spoken ill of, or even ridiculed occasionally, but God and the ancestors are always held in awe. *The Africans have the belief that after death, the departed ones enter or take a spiritual form or body. The ancestors are believed to be the living dead. They are the senior members of lineage who have died, but still continue to wield influence in the lives of the living. They are always revered and held in high esteem. It is believed that after*

²²Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 174.

*death, they enter into a spiritual state of existence and they are ranked second in importance after to God in Akan Traditional Religion.*²³

3.3 The Supreme Being in African as the God of Christianity?

African scholars generally agree that God is unique, supreme and totally distinct from all other creatures. As the creator and sustainer, *God* is father of all lesser divinities and therefore not a part of a pantheon of lesser divinities. There is also a general agreement that God is supreme over all in an absolute sense.

The concept of God as the creator of the world and human beings is native to the Africans and not, as some early writers on the subject asserted, of foreign origin. Diverse African ethnic groups have a name for God which is different from the names given to other spiritual beings they recognize. The name *Onyame* and *Oludumare* are exclusively used for the Supreme Being in Akan and Yoruba respectively. Both *Onyame* and *Oludumare* are singular and none of them in any sense expresses a divine assembly.²⁴

In his inquiries about African gods before the arrival of missionaries, Kombo contends that the missionaries ignored the African pre-Christian experience of God. According to Kombo, the true significance of this kind of conceptualisation is that the God of the African pre-Christian tradition has turned out to be the God of Christian worship. He juxtaposes it with the way YHWH took the name of the Canaanite god EL. When YHWH took the name EL, He was able to penetrate the Semitic world. Similarly, in Africa the God that Christians proclaimed utilised the African world and

²³Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 36.

²⁴P.J. Ryan, "Arise, O God" The problem of "Gods" in West Africa *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11 (March, 1980): 161-170.

their worldview by taking on names like, *Nyame, Nyasaye, Oludumare, Mulungu, Mawu* and so on.²⁵

Kombo also discusses the incarnation: God endured to become man and to suffer: According to Kombo, the uniqueness of Christ must mean that He is not just a *friend, liberator, elder brother, king/chief, healer, master of initiation* and so on; Jesus is God.

Kombo concludes that when Africans use African names for God, its trinitarian character is accepted and in this way the African God is Christianised and the African religious heritage obtains a Christian meaning. Just like Nyamiti, Kombo recognises monotheism in Africa. He notices that pre-Christian Africa had a form of monotheism that has been called primitive monotheism or diffused monotheism. But he denies the concept of polytheism. Kombo maintains that ‘pre-Christian African religious consciousness had no place for polytheism, meaning that there was no worship of many gods.’ His argument is based on the fact that no temple was ever built for an idol or image worshipped in Africa. He adds that spirits are spirits of the people who have died, not of gods.²⁶

Kombo proposes ‘a modified monotheism where Christ and the Holy Spirit shall be situated in the centre of primitive monotheism.’ Kombo’s standpoint is similar to the Western evangelical position. He does not adopt too much terminology and categories from African traditional religion such as ancestors and other divinities, but recognises

²⁵ J. Kombo, “The Trinity in Africa”, *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3, no.1 (2009): 133.

²⁶ Kombo, *The Trinity in Africa*, 136.

the role and position of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Africans in their worship of God continue to experience God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²⁷

The issue about the relationship between God in a cultural context and the God Christians proclaim has previously been raised by Mbiti, Idowu, Kato and other African theologians.²⁸ John Mbiti discusses the concepts of God in Africa in his two books: *Concepts of God in Africa* and *African Religions and Philosophy*. Mbiti's concludes that in most African societies, people have a notion of God as the Supreme Being. He located the notion of God among the African societies in proverbs, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies. He attributed the similarities and the differences of the African society's concept of God to the fact that it is strongly coloured and influenced by the social and cultural backgrounds, and environment of the people.

Mbiti concedes that certain ideas have had an influence in Africa, but he points out that there are cardinal teaching, doctrines and beliefs of Christianity, Judaism and Islam that cannot be traced in traditional religions. He then argues that these major religious traditions therefore cannot have been responsible for disseminating those concepts of God in traditional religion which resemble some biblical and Semitic ideas about God. Mbiti also maintains that there are sufficient elements in the African's belief of God which make it possible to discuss the African concept of God as a unity and on a continental scale. He contends that God did not only reveal himself to Abraham and other Old Testament fathers but also to African forefathers. He introduces the notion that African Traditional Religion prepared Africans for the

²⁷Kombo, *The Trinity in Africa*, 136.

²⁸Kombo, *The Trinity in Africa*, 133.

acceptance of Christianity. When the Bible was translated into African languages, local names were used for God. It is unclear, however, whether Mbiti thinks that Christianity was a way to help Africans to discover the God of pre-Christian history or whether it made Africans repent and turn towards the God of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Idowu also argues that the God of the African tradition is not intrinsically different from the God of Christian proclamation and experience. He rejects any such distinction, affirming that Africa recognises only one God, the Supreme Universal God, One and the same God, the creator of all the ends of the earth. For Idowu, “God” also means *Olodumare* was known and experienced in Yoruba pre-Christian religions. He argues that it would be inappropriate for anyone to talk about three or many Gods in Africa of which each of the three dominant religions, namely Christianity, Islam and African traditional takes its own exclusive choice. Idowu also contends that the basic theology of the Traditional Religion (as of Islam and Christianity) in each locality has always insisted on one God, one universe. He follows the argument that because God is one, the traditional religious worshippers in Africa serve the same God worshipped by Christians and Muslims but with different approaches.²⁹

Ogbonnaya in his discussion of African divinity introduces a debate about ‘the one and the many’. On the nature of the African concept of God, Ogbonnaya poses a question: Do the Africans conceive of the divine as an absolute, singular, personalistic God (monotheism) or conceived of in separatist (polytheistic) terms? This question has been a bone of contention in African traditional religion. Basically, there are two predominant positions in debate. While some African theologians like Idowu, Mbiti

²⁹ B. H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangelical Publishing House, 1975), 13-29.

and Sarpong are of the view that African traditional religions lend more towards monotheism, Kato holds an opposite view – polytheism. However, Ogbonnaya believes there is a third option. The first position deals with monotheism, the second deals with polytheism. He draws out a third which he calls *a community of gods*.³⁰

Ogbonnaya discusses the term *dispositio* and considers it ‘closer to the African concept of intergenerative interconnection based on a never-ceasing belonging within the community that fosters a continual and unbroken communication. Ogbonnaya regards *dispositio* as a reference to the internal relation between the various dimensions of a person – the body, soul and spirit – which are in continuous interaction with one another.’³¹

However, the explanation of the word *dispositio* suggests the incarnation rather than the Trinity, because it is the internal relation between the various dimensions of a person: the body, soul and spirit. But, if the dimensions of a person are only body and soul due to the dualistic approach of some of the church fathers, what about the spirit?

a) African Traditional Religion, Monotheistic?

Ogbonnaya argues that there is no such thing as ‘monotheistic radicalism in African traditional religions. He regards any African who holds the monotheistic position as being influenced by the West. He believes that those scholars with Western influence accept the concept of God as absolutely personalistic and they continue to speak of the high or great God. He considers the term monotheism to be foreign to African traditional religion. He is dismayed with many African scholars who try to present the

³⁰Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 2-19.

³¹Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 68.

existence of an absolute monotheism of a singular personalistic deity in African traditional religions.

Ogbonnaya attacks the idea of the Supreme Being because it has a reference to one Superior Person. He argues that the use of the name Supreme Being can be used for any other being based on experience and it does not reveal the character of God. For Ogbonnaya, Supreme Being seems to be unable to relate and communicate feelings. Some kind of experiences may cause a name change for that Being. He notes that the greatness of any particular God depends on the experience of the individual addressing that God. According to Ogbonnaya, names like Supreme God, Most High God, Father of all and Great Ancestor that are employed as a means to prove monotheism.

The worry of Ogbonnaya is that, the idea of a Supreme God has a negative influence on the worship and recognition of other gods. Since names like Supreme God can convey an idea of a God who is incapable of having children or incapable of being in close familiar relationships, such a one cannot be truly God. He continues to say that 'a god incapable of working within a community of beings of similar substance would be highly suspect.' From the African perspective, to be alone is regarded as a sign of being cursed. Therefore, it is African traditional religion's belief that God cannot be alone or singular because he has to have a community.

b) African Traditional Religion, Polytheistic?

Ogbonnaya notes that polytheism is that which separates the divine nature into many disparate parts. He also suggests that the term polytheism is a Western concept. For Ogbonnaya the use of the terms monotheism and polytheism does not do justice to African traditional religions. Because monotheism and polytheism are inadequate, Ogbonnaya introduces a third category, namely 'divine as community', as a more adequate way of conceiving of and explaining divinity in African contexts. He further explains that 'divine communalism is the position that the divine is a community of gods who are fundamentally related to one another and are ontologically equal.

Analyzing the contributions of the above theologians, it is sufficient to conclude that the concept of God is encountered all over Africa and that there is no debate anymore with regards to the originality of the concept. More importantly, it is also clear that the African theologians see the Supreme Being in Africa as none other than the God proclaimed by Christianity. However, this equation does raise further theological questions on the relationship between the Supreme Being and lesser divinities in African belief on one hand, and the relationship between God and lesser divinities in Christian belief on the other.

In Christianity, God tends to be isolated from the lesser divinities who the African (traditionally) has believed were closely related to him. Meanwhile, many African societies have already identified their traditional concept of the Supreme Being with the Christian God. This is clear in Bible translation, as the various African names for Supreme Being is used for the Christian God.

3.4 Conclusion

Traditionally, African theologians are divided on their views on the nature of God in African traditional religion. While some African theologians like Idowu, Mbiti and Sarpong are of the view that African traditional religions lend more towards monotheism. Kato holds an opposite view – polytheism. However, Ogbonnaya believes there is a third option, which he calls *a community of gods*. As it is clearly seen from the analysis, Ogbonnaya does not believe that African traditional religions follow the worship of one God. In trying to avoid the word polytheism, Ogbonnaya used the term ‘a plurality of gods’.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ECUMENICAL DOCTRINE OF TRINITY

4.1 Introduction

The word “*trinity*” is derived from a Latin word: “*trinitas*”. It is an abstract noun which means “*three-ness*”. *Trinitas*” has sense of “*the property of occurring three at once*” or “*three in one*”. The Greek word “*τριας*”, means “a set of three” or “the number three”. Theophilus of Antioch (180 AD) is known to be the first person to use this word. However, it was Tertullian who later constructed the concept of Trinity which formed the basis of ecumenical doctrine of Trinity.

This chapter describes the Ecumenical doctrine of Trinity. The focus is to lay a foundation in which African theologians’ proposal of Trinity could be compared with that of the Ecumenical.

The Trinity as a Christian doctrine describes the nature of God. The doctrine makes some affirmation and denials. It affirms that: (a) There is one and only one God (b) God eternally exists in three distinct persons, (c) The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. The doctrine also deny that (d) The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, the Father is not the Spirit.

4.2 The Development of the Doctrine of Trinity: Ecumenical Councils on Trinity

a) The Council of Nicea (325): The question of Jesus as truly God

The programme of the Council of Nicea (325) was to discuss Jesus’ divinity; the status of the “Logos” and His relation to the Godhead.³² The problem arose from the

³²John Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers 1978), 224.

difficulty of combining the divinity of Christ, the incarnate *Logos*, with the unity in God. The Arian view of Christ as creature collided with the traditional understanding of Jesus as true God. At the beginning the Trinity as such was apparently not directly at stake. But, in the course of the controversy, it became clear that one cannot discuss Christology without entering into debates on the concept of God.³³

Before the Council, there were some notable sects which had already denied the full divinity of Christ. The Ebionites taught that Jesus was not God, but a human prophet promised in the Old Testament. In the third century, Sabellius also stressed monotheism to the extent of declaring that *Logos* was a function of God the Father rather than a separate Person, but his view had comparatively few adherents. Another group, called the Adoptionists, taught that Jesus was an ordinary human being by nature but was adopted as God's Son because of the exemplary and dedicated life that he lived. Origen also explicitly taught that the Son is subordinate to the Father.³⁴

The most immediate issue that led to the Council of Nicene was the controversy of Arius, an Alexandrian monk. The issue at stake was the status of the "Son" and his relation to God the Father. Arius accused Bishop Alexander of deviant teaching. That is, proclaiming the Son and the Father to be co-eternal.³⁵

Arius contended that Jesus was divine, but that he was less divine than God the Father. For Arius, because the Son is "Son", he is "begotten". The Son is therefore not, in any strict or proper sense, God. Thus the Son cannot be co-eternal with the Father.

Arius also contended that "the Son had a beginning, but God is without beginning."

³³ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 223.

³⁴ Pelikan 1971:198.

³⁵ See Pelikan 1971:200.

He therefore explicitly rejected the idea that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father and insisted that the Father is “different in ousia” from the Son.

Alexander (the Bishop of Alexandria) challenged Arius over this view, and this led to some controversy. The precise details of Alexander’s position are somewhat obscure in the account which Arius gave in his accusation letter concerning Alexander. However, the broad shape of Alexander’s position is clear enough. He held that the Father and the Son are co-eternal. The Son co-exists with the Father and emanates from the Father.

After the death of Alexander, Athanasius became Bishop of Alexandria. Nonetheless, Arius’ controversy led to the first ecumenical Council held at Nicene in AD 325. Emperor Constantine himself moderated the meeting.³⁶

In his response to Arius’ views, Athanasius argues as follows: Firstly, Arianism undermined the Christian doctrine of God by presupposing that Jesus is not eternal and thereby virtually reintroducing polytheism. Secondly, Arius’ view made nonsense of the established liturgical customs of baptising in the Son’s name as well as the Father’s, and addressing prayers to the Son. After some deliberations, the Council decided that Jesus was fully God. The views which directly affected the full divinity of Jesus were therefore declared as heresies by the Council.³⁷

The Council declared the Son to be co-essential with the Father. The key concept used

³⁶Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 230- 232.

³⁷ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 233.

to maintain the full divinity of Jesus was the Greek term *homoousios*. The characteristic Nicene emphases are: “true God from true God, begotten, not made, *homoousios* with the Father”. The term does not stand alone, nor can it be adequately understood if it is isolated from its background and treated simply by itself.

The terms, *ousia* and *homoousios* stress that the Son of God is himself authentically God, that is, genuinely Son rather than a created being. He is, not “made” but “begotten”; his being derives from the being of the Father himself. He therefore shared the same essence with the Father. The phrase co-essential with the Father or “*homoousios* with the Father” recapitulates and focuses all the positive and negative affirmations in the Council of Nicene.³⁸

The Council of Nicea drafted a new Creed which was to become the standard for orthodox faith. The Nicene Creed, as we know now, is a later compilation which most likely dates from the Council of Constantinople of 380/1. However, this includes material from the earlier creed of Nicene. This earlier creed includes the following clauses:

We believe in one God ... and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father as unique (*monogenes*), that is from the *ousia* of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, *homoousios* with the Father, through whom all things were made ...

The rejection of Arius’ Christology is then to be found in the canon which immediately followed the Creed:

And those who say, “There was once when he was not,” and, “Before being begotten, he was not,” and that he came into being from nothing (*ex oukonton*); or who declare that the Son of God is from some other

³⁸ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 236.

hypostasis or *ousia* (sc. than the Father's), or that he is a creature or changeable or alterable: the catholic Church anathematizes.³⁹

Arius was finally condemned and excommunicated. However, in the later years in the East, Arianism came to prevail. Nonetheless, the Western church in general was more loyal to the definition of Nicea and regarded Athanasius as a defender of true doctrine.⁴⁰

b) The Council of Constantinople (381): The Question of Jesus as Truly Human and the Divinity of the Holy Spirit

After the affirmation of Jesus' divinity, an opposite Christological view known as docetism emerged which denied Jesus' humanity. Docetism has its roots in the Gnostics belief which held to divine impassability and the inherent impurity of matter.⁴¹

However, the main controversy that led to the Council of Constantinople was the Appollinarian controversy. The agenda of the Council of Constantinople (A.D.381) was to assert Christ's humanity without denying his divinity. The theological issue was the "Logos" and His relations to Christ's humanity. The controversy arose from the difficulty of combining the intellect and will of *Logos* with that of Christ's human intellect and will.⁴²

³⁹The Council rejected Arius' position most categorically, and left no loophole which would permit him and his allies to subscribe to the creed while maintaining their former position. As Arius had already rejected the notion of *homoousios*, the creed offered itself as a suitable instrument for this purpose. This at least he could not accept without genuinely shifting his ground. This suggests amongst other things that the use of *homoousios* at the Council of Nicene was primarily negative: it was a means of excluding Arian theology. Its positive meaning was never really explored clearly.

⁴⁰Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 238.

⁴¹Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 141.

⁴²Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 223.

On the one hand, we have the notion of the *Logos* which is fully divine in nature; on the other hand, Christ's human nature which is fully human in nature. If one assumes, as the Council of Nicene did, that the *Logos* has become flesh, then, it logically follows that either there are two natures (in the person of Christ) or one nature absorbs the rest of the other nature.

Following the latter view, we may then have a kind of "hybrid" in the person of Jesus. Apollinarius who was Bishop of Laodicea (ca.310-ca.390) and a strong supporter of *homoousion* theology held such a view. Apollinarius maintained that the *Logos* occupied the place of Christ's human spirit – performing the functions of intellect and will.

However, Athanasius rejected the proposed view of Apollinarius. Athanasius contended that rejection of a normal human psychology in Christ clashed with the biblical picture of a saviour who was limited in knowledge, and who suffered and underwent every kind of human experience. It was thus held that in Apollinarius' view, Jesus was not truly human, for his will was absorbed by the *Logos*.

The main concern of Apollinarius' opponents was the advocacy of Christ as Saviour – his mediating role between God and humankind. In this regard, Gregory of Nazianzus wrote: "If anyone has put his [sic – or her] trust in him without a human mind, he is really bereft of mind and quite unworthy of salvation. For that which he has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved".⁴³

⁴³ Stevenson 1981:98.

Apollinarianism was condemned at a council held in Rome in 378 AD – during the pontificate of Damasus. The Synods in the theological centres of the East also followed with condemnation; at Alexandria in 378 and Antioch in 379.

In May 381, Theodosius I called for a second ecumenical council to address the various Christological questions in a more formal way. The council was held in Constantinople. Some of the questions addressed by the Council can be posed as follows: Could Christ be said to be truly human without less being implied about his divinity than Nicea had already stated? How does the Spirit relate to the Father and to the Son?⁴⁴

After much deliberation, the Council formulated a revised creed and the formula known today as the Nicene Creed emerged:

We believe in one God, the father almighty, maker of heaven and earth of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ the only –begotten Son of God begotten from the father before all ages, light from light true God from true God begotten not made, of one substance , with the father through Whom all things came into existence, who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the father and will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end. And in the Spirit the Lord life –giver, who proceeds from the father who with the father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, who spoke through the prophets in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins, we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. *Amen.*

At the Council of Constantinople (381) the Nicene faith was reaffirmed, and the

⁴⁴Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 223.

various “Arianising” deviations were placed under a ban. The agenda that led to the condemnation of Apollinarius’ view of the true humanity of Christ. Nonetheless, the Council also promulgated what came to be known as the doctrine of Trinity.⁴⁵

Both the Council of Nicene and Constantinople taught that Jesus was fully divine and also fully human. These Councils however did not clarify how one person could be both divine and human, and how the divine and human were related within that one person.

4.3 Explanation of Terms

In Trinitarianism, God is said to be three persons in one essence, nature, or being. Theological explanations of the Trinity, especially as developed in the early church, included the use of certain key terms (originate from Greek language) which are included below for reference. The terms essence, nature and being are often seen as synonymous, but it can be helpful to understand what each means independently.⁴⁶

Essence

The word ‘essence’ may be defined as the intrinsic properties that serve to characterize something. In theological terminology essence describes what it is to be God. The Ecumenical position postulate that the three persons of the Godhead share the same essence, and God's essence is immaterial. With this understanding, the doctrine of the Trinity continues to assert monotheism.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Also see Bettenson (1956).

⁴⁶J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers 1978), 135-159.

⁴⁷Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 56

Nature

The word 'nature' may be defined as the essential characteristics and qualities of a person or thing. Sometimes 'nature' is synonymous with 'essence'. Ontologically, each of the three members of the Trinity possesses the same essential nature.

Being

The word 'being' may be defined as the state or quality of having existence. The triune God eternally exists and has eternal being. Again, along with a monotheistic understanding, there is one and only one being, that is, God.⁴⁸

Person

The word 'person' may be defined as the composite of characteristics that make up an individual personality. Scripture presents separate individualities of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as distinguished from the "essence" of the Godhead that unites them.

There are also some terminologies that are necessary to understand the doctrine of Trinity.⁴⁹

Homoousios

The Greek word, "*Homoousios*" means "*of the same substance*", or "*of one being*". English speaking Christians design the Son as *consubstantial* with the Father; while many profess that the Son is *one being* with the Father. In all senses, the three persons in God are equally divine. None is superior or inferior to the other. Each is totally God and all are totally God. Another dimension is that the three are present in each. "Where the Son is, there is the Father and the Spirit, and so on with all the three Persons."⁵⁰

⁴⁸Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 57.

⁴⁹Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 59.

⁵⁰Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 65.

Perichoresis

Perichoresis is a Greek term used to describe the triune relationship between each person of the Godhead. It can be defined as co-indwelling, co-inhering, and mutual interpenetration. This term was used to express the idea that the Son is in the Father, and the Father in the Son – that where the Father is, there the Son and Spirit are; that what the one does the others do (the Father creates, the Son creates, the Spirit creates), or, as our Lord expresses it.

Procession

The term *generation* specifies the procession of the Son from the Father. The Father generated the Son, not physically, but spiritually. It excludes any sense of becoming in God, not before and after. There is also a procession of the Spirit; He originated from the Father in a different way which is not generation. It is unfortunate to find that, “No one has come up with a satisfactory specific term.”⁵¹

Monotheism

Essential to the Trinity is that there is one and *only* one God. It is essential because it was the conviction of monotheism - that there is one God - that drove the early Christians to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity from Scripture. More importantly, monotheism is the teaching found in the Bible. Fundamental to the Judaism of the Old Testament (and of today) is the *shema*: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one..." (Deut 6:4). The understanding of monotheism is at the heart of this passage, and it was at the core of the early Christians understanding of the nature of God.⁵²

⁵¹Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine*, 23.

⁵²Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 70.

The doctrine of the Trinity was formally developed in the early church in reaction to variant teaching on the nature of God, especially that of Arianism. The focus of Arianism was to protect monotheism by denying the full deity of Jesus – a belief many Christians held at that time. Arianism was of the view that Jesus was divine, but that he was a lesser deity than the Father. To affirm the Church's stance on the nature of God, the Trinity was formally asserted at the council of Constantinople and documented in a creed.

The debate on the Holy Spirit was not a concern in the Nicene formula, only because of that absence of any controversy related to the issue. The Holy Spirit receives an attention at the Council of Constantinople, which its conclusions states: “the Lord and giver of life who proceeds from the Father, and is worshiped and glorified with that Father and Son.” The Spirit is not described as God, but the language is unambiguous – the Spirit is to be treated as having the same divinity and rank as the Father and the Son, even if the term “God” is not to be used explicitly.

Subsequently, any departure from the Ecumenical doctrine of the Trinity was considered heresy. This creed affirms the early Christian conviction that Jesus was God. The variant teachings especially that of Arius, caused the church to reflect on its theology and take crucial theological position.

The term "Trinity", is not found in the Bible. Tertullian in 215 A.D. was the first person to state this doctrine using the Latin term, *Trinitas* (Trinity), referring to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵³

The debates on the Holy Trinity went in such a way that the Early Church was not active to make much reflection on this area of doctrine; only because the debate was more centered on the relation between the Father and the Son, and particularly the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. The early Fathers seemed to be hesitating to attribute a definitive divinity to the Spirit.

On the *pneumatomachoi* "opponents of the Spirit" debates, it was argued that neither the person, nor the works of the Spirit were to be regarded as having the status or nature of a divine person. However, Athanasius argued that such line of thinking has serious consequences in the explanation of the Spirit. He made reference to that with reference to popular formula used in baptism; Athanasius argues that the Spirit shares the same divinity as the Son and the Father. Nonetheless, the precise relation of the Spirit to the Father and Son would subsequently become an item of debate in its own right, as the folioque controversy indicated.

Here, 'proceeds' from the Father indicates the Holy Spirit is of the Father without being created. The Holy Spirit, therefore, is not to be included among the created

⁵³J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers 1978), 135-159. Tertullian was a member of Montanism. This movement resembles the present-day Pentecostal churches. The activities of this group ignited the debates on the Holy Spirit. They claimed to profess a certain prophetism involving the ability to speak in tongues. At a certain time Montanus declared himself possessed by the Holy Spirit and prophesied. His movement was joined by Priscilla and Maximilla, who also prophesied.

entities. Moreover, the Spirit, who is glorified with the Father and the Son, is holy by nature, just as the Father is holy and the Son is holy and that he must not be separated from the Father and the Son.

4.4 Misconceptions about the Trinity (Trinitarian Heresies)

In the history of the Church, various heresies arose from those who oppose the Ecumenical doctrinal positions, many of which required significant replies in order to defend the orthodox view of the one triune God.

The heretics did not work outside the Christian community. Rather, they counted themselves as faithful Christians attempting to explain the gospel in terms their contemporaries might understand. That is, some heretics would ascribe to ‘one God’ but would mean something different than what orthodox Christians taught. A classical example of the heretics is Arianism. Adoptionism is denial of the eternal deity of each Person. These result from a denial of the statement, "Each Person is fully God". Modalism is also denial of the three Personalities or Persons. These result from a denial of the statement, "The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct, eternal Persons".

4.5 Conclusion

For several centuries the Church explicated the doctrine of Trinity under the historical milestones: the Council of Nicene (325), the Council of Constantinople (381), the Council of Ephesus (431), and the Council of Chalcedon (541). The fundamental conclusion of the Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon affirmation was that God is “one in essence, distinguished in three persons.”

The Trinity is a doctrine of the Christian which accepts the existence of one God in three persons; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. While the notion of God as Father is mostly accepted by the Judea tradition, the other two namely God the Son and God the Holy Spirit is fiercely debated. It is therefore necessary to give the historical background of the (formal) inclusion of the two, Jesus as God and Holy Spirit as God, into the concept Godhead.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHARLES NYAMITI'S ANCESTRAL TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

5.1 Introduction

Professor Nyamiti is the African theologian who has penetrated deepest both into the idea of ancestors as a theological point of departure and into the idea of the doctrine of Trinity. Nyamiti is a vibrant pioneer of Inculturated African Theology – a theology that uses African culture and religious beliefs to expresses Christian faith.

The sequence in this chapter is as follows: section 5. 2 will be on a brief biography of Charles Nyamiti. Section 5.3 will be the description of Nyamiti's methodological approach will follow. Section 5.4 entails his understanding of ancestral cult, which serves as basis for his Trinitarian construction. Section 5.5 describes Nyamiti's ancestral trinity which section 5.6 concludes the chapter.

5.2 A Brief Biography Charles Nyamiti

Charles Nyamiti was born in 1931, among three brothers and four sisters, to Mzee Theophilus Chambi Chambigulu and Mama Helen Nyasolo. He is from the Wanyamwezi of Tanzania. Nyamiti is one of the founding scholars of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) where he later became full professor of Systematic/Dogmatic Theology. He remains professor emeritus at CUEA. He holds doctorates in Systematic/Dogmatic Theology and Social Anthropology and a Laureate in Music Composition.

Nyamiti was ordained a Catholic priest in 1962. Soon after his ordination, Nyamiti studied at Louvain University in Belgium from 1963 to 1969 and he graduated with a PhD in Systematic/Dogmatic Theology and a certificate in Music Theory and Piano. He also studied Cultural Anthropology and Music Composition graduating with another PhD and Licentiate respectively.

From 1976 to 1981, he was professor at Kipalapala Senior Seminary in Tanzania and a co-worker in some neighboring parishes. In 1983, Nyamiti moved to Nairobi to found what is today CUEA where he remains to date. Nyamiti is founder member of the Ecumenical Theological Symposium of Scholars from Eastern Africa; EATWOT founder member. He was also a resource person for the Special Assembly for Africa of the synod of Bishops. Nyamiti is multi-lingua. He writes and speaks English, French and German. He also writes and reads Hebrew and Greek and Latin. Remarkably, Nyamiti could also speak, write and read three of the Eastern Africa languages. As a focused scholar, Nyamiti opts more for publishing articles than books

thus having just about four monographs and numerous published articles - some of which are “books” by themselves – to his credit.

5.3 Inculturation: Nyamiti’s Approach to Theology

For Nyamiti, the need for African Christianity is that of an authentic Christian faith which has to be contextualized in order to be truly African and truly Christian. This is the goal of inculturation. Nyamiti’s pedagogy is specifically rooted in African world-view and Christianity. His vision for African theology is the realization of African theology of reconstruction; a kind of African theology which will authentically and scientifically marry the Inculturation approach with the orientation of liberation theology adhering strictly to orthodoxy and relevance to our changing society and new economic, political and cultural realities.

According to Nyamiti, many missionaries condemned African culture and substituted Western cultural and religious practices. Usually, such missionary condemnations are without proper evaluating of African religious beliefs and practices. Fashole Luke also criticizes the missionary Evangelism on the ground that, Western missionaries stressed aspects of discontinuity between Christianity, African cultures and traditional religion to such extent that they excluded aspects of continuity between the three. This negative attitude forced Africans to undertake the task of rejecting the missionary praxis, and that of reconstruction.

5.4 Concept of Ancestor as Basis of Nyamiti’s Trinitarian Theology

Nyamiti discusses the doctrine of the Trinity from the perspective of the African traditional religion's conception of ancestor.⁵⁴ We will mention a few points about the cult of ancestors in Africa, even though there is no uniform system of beliefs. Nevertheless, the cult belongs to the majority of the African people. The most important aspect of the African traditional religion is the ancestral cult. Nyamiti argues that the predominant influence in the African religion is neither Supreme Being nor the hundreds of lesser divinities, but the ancestors. To find out who these ancestors are, the researcher in this section describes and analyses the identity of the ancestors.

Amongst the West and East Africans, not every deceased can become an ancestor; one must fulfil certain conditions. The person must be an adult and must have attained a senior age and must have had children.

Thus, those who have died as children cannot become ancestors. Nyamiti notes that the reason Africans desire to have many children is 'because by naming a child after an ancestor, the spirit continues living within that family. For Nyamiti, the link between the living and the dead is the continuation of the relationship. This is so because no one can be an ancestor of a family that they are not related to.

West and East African ancestors include both men and women. Ancestors must have led a life worthy of emulation, that is, an exemplary life while on earth. A "natural" death is also an important condition for ancestorship. One cannot be an ancestor if one dies by way of an accident or suicide, or through an "unclean" disease such as lunacy,

⁵⁴ C. Nyamiti, "The Trinity from an African ancestral perspective", *Journal of the Catholic University Eastern Africa in African Christian Studies* 12(4), (1996), 38.

dropsy, leprosy/epilepsy or HIV-AIDS. According to African beliefs, death does not immediately annihilate life. The departed continue to live in the spirit world; the ancestors live in a place of erstwhile those who do not qualify as ancestors roam about.⁵⁵

The West and East Africans believe that from the dwelling of bliss, some ancestors can come back to be reborn in order to finish an assignment which he or she started, but could not complete. It is also believed that some of the deceased can decide to come back to be reborn for another lease of life. Thus, the Akan name *Ababio* (return from the dead).⁵⁶

By death an ancestor enters the life of sacred superhuman status, but the power of the ancestor is only linked to the family where the living enjoy the benefit of the dead, as long as they keep on venerating that ancestor.⁵⁷

In his reinterpretation of ancestor veneration, Nyamiti distinguishes four types: (a) the traditional ancestors who take part in the Christian veneration of ancestors through incorporation into the body of Christ; (b) the saints in heaven and in purgatory who in light of their incorporation into the body of Christ, are brother-ancestors of the African Christians; (c) Jesus Christ, the brother-ancestor and (d) God himself, as the parent-ancestor of the human race.⁵⁸ In keeping with this, Nyamiti contends that the ancestors function as the mediators between God and their earthly kinsfolk.⁵⁹

Nyamiti bases his Christological reflections mainly on an African understanding of

⁵⁵P.K. Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspect of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1994), 34.

⁵⁶The Yoruba of Nigeria has a similar belief. See Opoku (1978) for a detailed discussion on this.

⁵⁷Nyamiti, *The Trinity from an African Ancestral Perspective*, 39.

⁵⁸Nyamiti, *The Trinity from an African Ancestral Perspective*, 20-23.

⁵⁹Nyamiti, *The Trinity from an African Ancestral Perspective*, 21.

ancestors. He takes his starting point in the beliefs and practices of the ancestral cult as found in many (though not all) African traditional societies. According to Nyamiti, ancestral relationships between the living and the dead, and sometimes between the Supreme Being and humanity on earth, comprise of the following elements: (a) kinship between the dead and the living; (b) superhuman status (usually acquired through death) comprising nearness to God, sacred powers, and other superhuman qualities; (c) mediation between God and the earthly kin; (d) exemplary behaviour in the community; (e) the right or title to frequent sacred communication with the living kin through prayers and ritual offerings.⁶⁰

Nyamiti rightly observes that there is no uniform ancestor religion amongst African societies. Yet, he contends that there are enough beliefs shared by most of these societies to enable one to affirm the presence of common ancestral beliefs in black Africa. On this basis, Nyamiti points out two elements which are characteristic of the African conception of an ancestor: first, the natural relationship between the ancestor and his/her earthly relatives; second, a supernatural or sacred status acquired by the ancestor through death.⁶¹

He notes that natural relationships of kinship can be based on the following: a blood relationship with parents, and – more rarely – with brothers and sisters, or on the common membership of a clan, tribe, secret society, etc. In order to attain the supernatural or holy status of an “ancestor”, the deceased must have led a morally unobjectionable life, so that one can do justice to this person’s future role as a role model. As an ancestor he or she is a source and a store of the tribal tradition. If the

⁶⁰Nyamiti, *The Trinity from an African Ancestral Perspective*, 16.

⁶¹Nyamiti, *The Trinity from an African ancestral perspective*, 19-23.

people do not pay sufficient attention to the ancestors, unpleasant consequences may result.

Nyamiti notes that, as a rule, the natural relationship between the African ancestors and their earthly relatives is based on parenthood. However, as basis for his ancestor Christology he focuses on the sibling relationship. Although he concedes this relationship to be rare, he nevertheless considers Jesus Christ as brother-ancestor of human beings.

He contends that “a brother-ancestor is a relative of a person with whom he has a common parent, and of whom he is a mediator to God, an archetype of behaviour, and with whom – thanks to his supernatural status acquired through death – he is entitled to have regular sacred communication.” Nyamiti presumes a structural affinity in this relationship between the African brother-ancestor and his earthly relatives to that between Jesus Christ and the members of his earthly body.

Nyamiti further contends that Christ’s brotherhood is revealed as the divine example of its African counterpart. The resulting difference is grounded in the unity of God and human beings in Jesus Christ and his mediation in salvation. He explains that the natural affinity through a common descent from Adam is transcended by Jesus Christ. Thus, the natural kinship characteristic of the African conception of ancestors is *de facto* transcended and disposed of at a higher level.

Nyamiti is of the view that ‘the concept of ancestors conveys the understanding that the worth of any human or religious value transcends time and place.’⁶² Drawing from African culture, Africans live their lives linked and connected to one another beyond the limitation of time and space. Nyamiti said that Africans should be taught to consider any authentic cultural values from any African society as belonging to him or her.⁶³ Nyamiti speaks of African theology founded on common cultural elements.

In addition, Nyamiti asserts that, owing to ancestors’ superhuman condition and nearness to the Creator, the ancestors are sometimes considered mediators between the Supreme Being and their earthly kin. This becomes necessary as the living relatives only turn to the Supreme Being as a last resort. The living receives benefits from their ancestors, such as protection from sickness, long life, great wealth or many children. In return the ancestors demand loyalty from the living relatives in the form of prayers and rituals. Nyamiti contends that in some communities the Creator is regarded as an ancestor.⁶⁴

From the above analysis, Nyamiti seems to suggest that trinitarian concepts should engage with African ancestral understanding and a more thorough and critical examination could be made to discover more similarities and especially differences, and drew out more theological implications. Interestingly, this is what Nyamiti has attempted to do.

Nyamiti on Ancestral Trinity

Recently, several attempts have been made to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity

⁶²Nyamiti, “*The Trinity from an African ancestral perspective*”, 44.

⁶³Nyamiti, “*The Trinity from an African ancestral perspective*”, 44.

⁶⁴Nyamiti, *The Trinity from an African Ancestral Perspective*, 50.

from within the African context. Nyamiti is an African theologian who has contributed to this discourse. Nyamiti has written on Trinity from different African perspectives, including: African concepts of responsibility, naming ceremony, personality and fecundity, African relational worldview and ancestral relations. Of all these, ancestral relations remains most elaborated by him.

Nyamiti argues that ancestral relations exist within the triune God. In reference to the notion of the Trinity, Nyamiti, implements the following ancestral terminology: The Father is the Ancestor of the Son who is the Descendant. The Holy Spirit is the mutual Oblation of the two. The traditional (Ecumenical) model of Trinity makes distinctions between the divine persons. According to Nyamiti, the communication between the Father and the Son being is through begetting. And that this is the only form of mutual contact between these two persons (Father and the Son) which takes place through the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵

Nyamiti contends further that both the Father and the Son begets the Holy Spirit through *spiration* (term used by Nyamiti to denote the act of breathing] and communicates to each other as an expression of their mutual love. Nyamiti notes that those who love each other give themselves to one another.⁶⁶

This construction, Nyamiti believes, is not only inculturated local theology but a major theological innovation which is valid in all countries of the world, regardless of whether there exists ancestral cults in those countries or not. This conviction is based

⁶⁵Nyamiti, *The Trinity from an African ancestral perspective*, 48.

⁶⁶Nyamiti, *The Trinity from an African ancestral perspective*, 48.

on the proposal that ancestorship is really an existing universal entity which can be found both in God and men.

5.5 Conclusion

Nyamiti applies the categories of ancestral relationships within the Trinity. Nyamiti says that the Father and the Son communicate the Holy Spirit to each other and oblations as a token of their mutual love, homage and gratitude. Applying this to Ancestral Trinity, he says that God the Father is, analogically speaking, the ancestor and ancestress of his Son and the latter is his true Descendant.⁶⁷

Nyamiti focuses on the family and culture for his development of Trinity but Ogbonnaya focused on the community of divinity. Nyamiti contends that, in a family, one is born within a relationship. He argues that, since there is communication amongst individuals within the family, the same happens for the divine family, namely, the Trinity.

Nyamiti acknowledges one Supreme Being, an idea which contrasts with that of the community of the divine favoured by Ogbonnaya.⁶⁸ Nyamiti also talks about the closeness of the ancestors to the Supreme Being.⁶⁹ This is also in contrast with Ogbonnaya's position who does not accept that Africans worship their ancestors.⁷⁰

⁶⁷Nyamiti, *The Trinity from an African ancestral perspective*, 49.

⁶⁸Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity*.

⁶⁹Nyamiti, *The Trinity from an African ancestral perspective*, 49.

⁷⁰Nyamiti, *The Trinity from an African ancestral perspective*, 49-50.

CHAPTER SIX

ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON

6.1 Introduction

The doctrine of Trinity in Christianity was part of a set of doctrines brought to Africa by the Western missionaries. As part of contextualization process of African Christian theology, some attempts have been made to re-interpret Trinity in terms of monotheism. African theologians have approached it in different ways within African context in order to clarify this classical Christian doctrine without distorting its nuances.

Many scholars, writing from an African perspective, interpret the Trinity in many ways. So far, four different approaches have been discussed including: 1) a proposal of Trinity and African worldview; 2) discourses on Trinity and African family, 3) Ujamaa Trinity from East African context 4) proposal of *Nyamebaasakro* from Akan, West African Context. Section 4.6 concludes the chapter.

In addition, Ogbonnaya recognises the Trinity as a community of divinity and rejects both monotheism and polytheism. Nyamiti sees God as the ancestor who has an ancestral relationship with his son. Kombo also explores the African names employed for the divine in African languages and claims that in those names the Trinity is implied.

6.2 The Necessity of African Trinity

In this study, the writer observed that the world-view of a people is one key to understand why a particular group of people act the way they do. And, the African Interpretation of the Trinity is taken as an approach moving in this direction, an attempt to understand this mysterious doctrine in an African context. Hence, Christology would be meaningless outside the doctrine of Trinity. And a genuine African Christology shall not be effective if the doctrine of the Trinity is inherited from the West without original African reflection. Therefore, the issue of a fresh African approach to the Trinity is a challenge for African Christians, and will definitely remain such, if the topic remains ignored by African theologians.

The need for an African approach to the doctrine on Trinity is pressing despite the difficulty or the feeling of inadequacy towards an indigenous African reflection on the issue; it was also not easy to the Greeks either even though the vocabulary of this teaching was borrowed from their own cultural environment.

African theologians, particularly Sarpong, appear to have abandoned the possibility of appropriating the Christian confession of the triune God within the African context. His contention is that, the doctrine of the Trinity is “simply beyond the

comprehension of any culture”. Nonetheless, several attempts have been made to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity from within the African context. Here, the review of the Vähäkangas on African trinitarian discourse may be the best available guide.⁷¹

Firstly, there is an attempt to relate the African family system to the concept of the Trinity. Most often when the theme of the family is discussed in African theology, the doctrinal topic connected to it is the communion within the church. Nonetheless an attempt has also been made to extend this to the subject of the Trinity. For Africans, family in the traditional sense, pertains to the extended family, or clan.

An example of the African family and trinitarian discourse is the African concept of *Ujamaa*. The Swahili word *jamaa* means (extended) “family” and belongs to the basic vocabulary of the language, whereas its derivative *ujamaa* (familyhood) belongs predominantly to political rhetoric.

According to this proposal, African concepts of family are not used as the standard criterion of a proper understanding of the Trinity. Rather, the trinitarian model is used to influence African models of family as well as be interpreted through them. The relationship between the Trinity and the African family model is not based on the number of persons but rather on the Holy Spirit as the bond of trinitarian unity. The primary view is that the African family should reflect the trinitarian communion.⁷²

Secondly, there is an attempt to construct a trinitarian theology on the basis of an ancestral model. Nyamiti is an African theologian who has penetrated this notion the deepest in relating the idea of ancestors to the doctrine of the Trinity. According to

⁷¹Vähäkangas, *African approaches to the Trinity*, 34.

⁷²Vähäkangas, *African approaches to the Trinity*, 34-37.

Nyamiti, all the ancestral characteristics, except mediation, can be found in the notion of God even if only in an analogical sense. Nyamiti contends that no human term or category can apply univocally to God and His creatures. However, one particularly, Agyarko disagrees with his contention. His reason is that the Akan concept of *okra* denotes both divine and human characteristics.

Nyamiti maintains that ancestral relations exist within the triune God. Thus, in reference to the notion of the Trinity, Nyamiti implements the following ancestral terminology: The Father is the Ancestor of the Son who is the Descendant. The Holy Spirit is the mutual Oblation of the two. In this regard the influence of Augustine's model of love to understand the triune God is evident.

Perhaps just the fact that the Trinity is not treated as a separate subject but as a foundational doctrine of Christianity helps Nyamiti to interweave different dimensions of theology and culture in his concept of Trinity. Nyamiti starts from a three-dimensional understanding of African family communality: the family consists of the living members, the beings and nature. Especially the relationship of a family to God is considered important here.

Thus, Nyamiti, concludes, African family ecclesiology draws its inspiration from this three-dimensionality of the African understanding of family. At the same time the Church, because it was founded by the Trinitarian God, reflects the communality of the Trinity. Also the relationship between the Church and the triune God is closely linked to the world in which the church has the task of "trinifying the world" and "enworlding the Trinity". Thus the concepts of Trinity, the Church, family and the tripartite cosmos are ingeniously interwoven in a consistent whole strongly based on

the standard Roman Catholic teaching of the church.

Using African categories, Nyamiti regards the Father as an ancestor who begets a Son, thus calling him a descendant, and the Holy Spirit as a gift from the Father to the Son. Nyamiti argues that: all this is due to the fact that in the African mind, ancestorship and descendancy are necessarily and immediately connected with sacredness; an ancestor is always conceived as one who is in a superhuman state which enables him to have a sacred or mystical relationship with his earthly kin.⁷³

From what has been pointed out concerning the relationship between the living family and the departed ancestor, the implication is that one of them has to be in the world of the living and the other one in the world of the dead. If God the Father is regarded as an ancestor, he had to die first. In reality it is the Son who died. The relationship of a descendant and the ancestor suggests a form of hierarchy which was the position of the heretics in the early church. During the time of the church fathers when the Holy Spirit was regarded as a gift or an oblation, as an expression of the love between Father and Son, it made the Spirit just a property or an object to be used. Then both the Son and the Holy Spirit lose their position of equality with the Father, which the Cappadocian Fathers advanced.

Thirdly, the African understanding of reality has been compared with the notion of the Trinity. According to Nyamiti, African understandings of reality always imply being-with-the-others; purely individual non-relational existence is out of the question. The quality or strength of a being is defined by his or her relations to the others. The

⁷³ C. Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 50.

deeper and more harmonious the union someone enjoys with others, the stronger he or she will be.⁷⁴

6.3 Nyamiti's Ancestral Trinity and Ecumenical Doctrine of Trinity:

Comparison

Nyamiti is the African theologian who has penetrated deepest both into the idea of ancestors as a theological point of departure and into the doctrine of the Trinity. Even though he has written on the Trinity from the point of view of African concepts of responsibility, naming ceremony, personality and fecundity as well as from an African relational worldview, ancestral relations remain the point of departure most elaborated by him.

Nyamiti defines ancestorship by listing five main elements: (1) Kinship between the ancestor or ancestors and his or her earthly kin, (2) Supreme or sacred status of the ancestor, (3) mediation between his earthly kin and the Supreme Being, (4) exemplarity of behavior in community and (5) finally, the idea that the ancestor enjoys right to regular sacred communication with his earthly kin. All of these qualities are more or less relational and only sacred status could be understood predominantly as essential in the sense that it represents more what the ancestor is rather than the ancestor's manner of being-with-the-others.

However, this status is linked to kinship in the sense that as a progenitor of living relatives, the ancestor is often considered as the “*source of life* of his terrestrial relatives”. Sacred status, in turn, is interpreted by Nyamiti to include “superhuman

⁷⁴Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 50.

vital force obtained through special nearness to the Supreme Being” which facilitates the ancestor’s being a mediator. The first three elements are based on the relative positions in the Bantu hierarchy of vital force. This hierarchy is a web relation in which vital force is transmitted from on high downwards and in which transmitting force down to one’s own dependents increases also the force of the transmitter. Thus, the first three elements are essentially relational.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that for Nyamiti, exemplarity of behaviour is a communal measure because exemplarity is manifested in community. Finally, the right to regular communication emphasizes the fact that the relations sought after are not only potential or theoretical but real. Ancestorship is thus not basically an entity in itself to be observed in isolation but rather it is a relation, comparable to parenthood.

According to Nyamiti, all the ancestral characteristics except mediation can be found in God even if only in an analogous sense since no human term or category can apply univocally to God and His creatures. Therefore, for Nyamiti, it is legitimate to maintain that there exists ancestral relations within the Trinity. It has to be noted that even though Nyamiti rules out the possibility of univocal application of ancestral terminology to the Trinity, he does not consider the terminology to apply only in a figurative or metaphorical sense.

For Nyamiti there really exists ancestral relations in the Trinity, and the reality to which ancestral terminology refers in the created and uncreated order is basically the same even if the proportion is different. The question is thus about an analogy of proper proportionality. Thus, in ancestral terminology, the Father is the Ancestor of

the Son who is the Descendent. The Holy Spirit is the mutual Oblation of the two. Is this but a play with words rehearsing Augustinian mutual love theory under an African guise, Vähäkangas asked?⁷⁵ Nyamiti is convinced that this is not the case. According to him, in the traditional western models of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit remains an outsider for the Trinity because fatherhood as such does not imply that there is a communion between the Father and the Son whereas this communion would naturally belong to ancestorship. What makes this statement problematic, however, is that today Nyamiti speaks clearly of an ancestor's enjoying a "title to ritual communication" instead of tending to speak of actual communication as he used to.

If ancestorship does not imply actual communication, the situation does not differ from the traditional model since it is possible to maintain that just as the ancestral relation ideally implies communication, so does the father-son relationship. Nyamiti also points out that his model would create an intrinsic link between fatherhood/sonship and sanctity because ancestor and descendant are by definition holy.

Furthermore, according to him, the Trinitarian exemplarity would be better understood by Africans if expressed through an ancestral terminology. This would be so because the western approaches concentrate easily on the *imago Dei* as an essential question whereas what counts for an African is not essentiality but exemplarity in the practical communal life. However, what adjudges the validity of theological constructions, according to Nyamiti, in addition to their orthodoxy, is the practical outcome for Christian life. For Nyamiti, the outcome is positive: a proper

⁷⁵Vähäkangas, *African approaches to the Trinity*, 44.

understanding of sanctification, a balanced view of God's mercy and anger, sound submission to the ecclesiastical authorities and a living missionary spirit.

In this Trinitarian proposal, Nyamiti notes that the ancestors acquired a *supernatural* or sacred status through death. He therefore claims that Christ's divinity corresponds with the attainment of the "supernatural" status of ancestors through death. Thus, the title "ancestor" to some degree becomes a synonym for divine sonship. In keeping with this belief, Nyamiti draws the conclusion that the ancestors are divine beings also.

The premise of the argument is that the ancestors are sacred. The conclusion is then drawn that the ancestors are divine beings. In between the premise and conclusion lies the assumption that all sacred entities are necessarily divine. However, this implies a strained argument and a logical fallacy. The reason being that, whereas Africans believe the ancestors to be sacred, these Africans rarely ascribes *divine status* to their ancestors. Amongst the West and East Africans, especially the Akan, ancestors are regarded as mere human spirits.

Of course in some rare instances, for example as found amongst the Yoruba of Nigeria, some ancestors are believed to become divinities, but they are then considered in the category of lesser divinities. Accordingly, if Christ obtained divine status along this path of ancestorhood, this would lead to a heresy comparable to Arianism.

Nyamiti wishes to avoid the pitfall of presenting Jesus as a mere human being.

However, despite all his careful safeguards and his concern to maintain the Chalcedonian affirmation of Christ as truly human as well as truly God, it is difficult to see how Nyamiti's Christology, and for that matter his Trinity, avoids an outcome similar to that of "degree Christology" (in other words, the divinity of Jesus would not tend to be derived from the greatness of his life, character and teaching).

Again, unlike the traditional models which attribute the distinctions between the divine persons to their relative opposition, Nyamiti maintains that the personality of each is derived from communion. The deeper one's communion becomes with others, the more fully he or she will exist as a person. Mulago, Penouku and Egbulefu also have attempted to explain the Trinity in this regard.⁷⁶

6.4 Conclusion

From this discussion, it should be obvious that the majority of African reflections on the Trinity are based on social analogies or familial relations. The possibility of re-appropriating into the African context the notion of triune God in ontological form, i.e. in terms of rational and relational entities, has also been achieved, albeit to a lesser extent. Many western theologians, following ecumenical contact with Eastern Orthodox theologians, have been attracted towards the "social analogy" to comprehend the relationship between the unity and the *tri*-unity of the divine persons. This is where African theologian Trinitarian proposals differ from the traditional Ecumenical view of Trinity.

⁷⁶Vähäkangas, *African approaches to the Trinity*, 23, 33-50.

Nonetheless, the ecumenical view of Trinity is at the heart of the Christian faith. The doctrine defines the Christian conception of God.⁷⁷ Among the religions of the world, the Christian faith is unique in making the claim that God is one and yet there are three who are God. Throughout its history, the church has confessed and proclaimed that it worships one God, yet in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995.

Pobee, John Samuel. *Towards an African Theology*. Nashville: Abington, 1979.

Agyarko, R. O. *God's Unique Priest (Nyamesofopreko): A Christology in Akan Context*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of the Western Cape, South Africa, 2010.

Erickson, M. *Christian Theology*. 2nd edn., Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2006.

Idowu, E.B. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. London: SCM Press, 1973

Idowu, E.B. *Toward an Indigenous Church*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965

⁷⁷ M. Erickson, *Christian theology: 2nd edn.*, (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2006), 347.

- Kato, B. H. *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. Kisumu, Kenya: Evangelical Publishing House, 1975.
- Kato, B.H. *Biblical Christianity in Africa*. Accra: African Christian Press, 1985.
- Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969.
- Mbiti, J.S. *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Mbiti, J.S. *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Mbiti, J.S. *Prayers of African Religion*. London: SPCK, 1975.
- Turaki, Y. *Christianity and African Gods*. Potchefstroom: North-West University, 1999.
- Sarpong, P. K. *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspect of Ghanaian Culture*. Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1994.
- Ogbonnaya, A. *On communitarian divinity: An African interpretation of the Trinity*. Paragon House, New York. 1994,
- Opoku, K.A. *West African Traditional Religion*. Singapore: F.E.P. International Private. 1978.
- Mugambi, J.N.K. *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity*. Nairobi: Longman Kenya Ltd, 1989.
- Idowu, E.B. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. London: SCM Press, 1973.
- Ela, Jean-Marc, *My Faith as an Africa*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988, 164.

JOURNALS

Kombo, J. 'The Trinity in Africa', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3, (2009) 125–143.

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/156973109X448698>

Maluleke, T.S. 'Christ in Africa: The influence of multi-culturality on the experience of Christ', *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 8(1), (1994): 49–64.

Maluleke, T.S. 'Will Jesus ever be the same again: What are the Africans doing to Him?' *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 11(1), (1997): 13–27.

Nyamiti, C. 'The Trinity from an African ancestral perspective', *Journal of the Catholic University Eastern Africa in African Christian Studies* 12(4), (1996): 38–74.

Vähäkangas, M., "African approaches to the Trinity." *African Theological Journal* (2000): 23, 33-50.

Ryan, P.J. "Arise, O God" The problem of "Gods" in West Africa." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11 (March, 1980): 161-170.

INTERNET SOURCES

Wilhelm, J., 'The Nicene Creed', in *New Advent*. (1911) (Assessed on 24 January 2012), URL: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11049a.htm>