

An Assessment of Selected Doctrines in Charles Nyamiti's Work and Its Relevance to the Pentecostal Movement in Africa

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Abstract

This study examines the work of Charles Nyamiti, a Tanzanian Roman Catholic theologian, and its relevance to the Pentecostal movement in Africa. It focuses on Nyamiti's threefold theological method (the comparative-dialogal, the apologetic, and the pedagogical) on the Trinity, ancestorship, and ecclesiology. The study based the evaluation on Nyamiti's 76-page book entitled *African Tradition and the Christian God*. The researcher observes theological divergences between Nyamiti's theological orientation and African Pentecostalism but believes that there are critical lessons for the African Pentecostals to glean from Charles Nyamiti's attempt to formulate African theology by employing philosophical inquiry. Pentecostals in Africa can glean from his theological method and the application of the approach to the Trinity, ancestorship, and ecclesiology.

Keywords: African Pentecostalism, Trinity, Ancestorship, Ecclesiology, Philosophical Inquiry

Introduction

One of the outstanding African Roman Catholic intellectuals whose theological contribution may benefit a broader range of Christian denominations, including African Pentecostalism, is Charles Nyamiti. He has been described as one of the leading theologians of the Anglophone¹ in his areas

¹ Yusufu Turaki, *Christianity and African Traditional Religion*, (An Unpublished MSS, n.d.), 68.



of theological expertise, dogmatics: God, Christology, and Ecclesiology.² Nyamiti was born on December 9, 1931, in a village called Ndala in the Tabora Region of Tanzania³ and died on May 19, 2020.⁴

Charles Nyamiti is among the founding scholars of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, where he worked for 34 years as a professor of dogmatic theology. He championed for the formulation of African theology by applying philosophical techniques.⁵ It is worth noting that this paper does not aim to assess Nyamiti's work comprehensively. Instead, it focuses on his doctrines of God, ancestorship, and ecclesiology and their relevance to the Pentecostal movement in Africa. The paper argues that although Nyamiti's theological method has been widely criticized,⁶ Pentecostals can glean some lessons from his scholarly contribution related to traditional African worldview and how it relates to the Trinity, ancestorship, and ecclesiology.

African Pentecostal Movement

Pentecostalism has been described as one of the fastest-growing missionary movements in the history of the church.⁷ In 1970, David Barrett predicted that the spread of Christianity, at the turn of the twentieth century, would be moving from the West to the South.⁸ This 'prophecy' seems

² James Nkansah-Obrempong. "Theological Methods." (PhD Power Point Lectures, Africa International University, Nairobi, September 2019).

³ Nyamiti's parents, Theophilus Chambi Chambigulu and Helen Nyasolo were also committed Catholics. After his early schooling, he went to Itaga seminary in Tanzania and later on joined a prominent seminary called Kipalala, in Tanzania, in 1955. In 1962, he was ordained as a diocesan priest shortly before he was sent to Belgium for his higher education in dogmatic theology. He also studied social anthropology and composition of music. See Strathmore University, "The Amazing Charles Nyamiti, Vibrant Pioneer of Enculturated African Theology, January 2022, video, 39:07, https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=nyamiti

⁴ Francis Anekwe Oborji, "Nyamiti, Charles," *Dacb.org*, Dictionary of African Christian Biography, 2020, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://dacb.org/stories/tanzania/nyamiti-charles/>.

⁵ Strathmore University, "The Amazing Charles Nyamiti."

⁶ Some of the earlier critics of Nyamiti's work, as we shall see later in this paper, are Mika Vahakangas in his book entitled, *In Search for Foundations for African Catholicism: Charles Nyamiti's Theological Methodology*: (Brill, Boston, 1999) and Joel Mokhoathi in his article "Jesus Christ as an Ancestor: A Critique of Ancestor Christology in Bantu Communities," ResearchGate, University of the Free State, 20 Apr. 2018.

⁷ See Jürgen Moltmann and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *Pentecostal Movements as an Ecumenical Challenge*, Concilium 1996/3 (London : Maryknoll, N.Y: SCM Press ; Orbis Books, 1996), 3., Daniel Isaiah Joseph, "Pentecostals vs Roman Catholics: What's the Difference?," *Christianity FAQ*, last modified September 8, 2021, accessed January 17, 2023, <https://christianityfaq.com/pentecostals-roman-catholics-differences>; Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1.

⁸ Miller and Yamamori *Global Pentecostalism*, 17.



to be confirmed by the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism experienced in Africa in recent years.⁹ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu defines the Pentecostal movement as,

... the stream of Christianity that emphasizes personal salvation in Christ as a transformative experience wrought by the Holy Spirit; and in which such pneumatic phenomena as ‘speaking in tongues,’ prophecies, visions, healing, miracles, and signs and wonders in general, are sought, accepted, valued, and consciously encouraged among members as evidence of the active presence of God’s Spirit.¹⁰

Scholars have classified Pentecostalism into various categories. For example, Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori have identified five Pentecostalism strains.¹¹ First, classical Pentecostals are Pentecostal denominations that trace their roots to the Pentecostal revival in Azusa Street in California. Such include Assemblies of God, the Church of God in Christ, and the International Church of the Four-Square Gospel, to mention a few. Second, indigenous Pentecostals are denominations that do not trace their origins to the West, such as the Winner’s Chapel in Nigeria and the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Brazil. Third, the independent Neo-Pentecostals started by “entrepreneurs who are dissatisfied for various reasons with the current religious marketplace.”¹² Founders of these churches usually lack theological training. Fourth, the charismatic renewal movement is linked to St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in California, where there was the Pentecostal revival in 1960 accompanied by speaking in tongues and later spread to Roman Catholic. Fifth, Miller and Yamamori suggest that the individuals who embrace Pentecostal ethos, although not Pentecostals themselves, are another expression of Pentecostalism. They call this category proto-charismatic Christians.¹³ In this paper, though not confined, the researcher has the first three categories of Pentecostalism in mind.

With the above understanding, it has been noted that the growth and expansion of the Pentecostal movement in Africa have impacted African Christianity to embrace its spiritual destiny within its local context.¹⁴ It is interesting, however, that scholars have divergent views on

⁹ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*, Studies of religion in Africa v. 27 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005), 9.

¹⁰ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “‘Born of Water and Spirit.’ Pentecostal/Charismatic in Africa,” in *African Christianity: An African Story: Perspectives on Africa Series*.” Eds. O. U. Kalu, P.J. Hofmeyr, P.J Maritz (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005), 389.

¹¹ Since this paper does not attempt to discuss Pentecostalism comprehensively, it suffices to just mention a strain and give a brief description. For detailed discussion on these categories of Pentecostalism see Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 27-28.

¹² Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 27.

¹³ Ibid., 27-28.

¹⁴ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “‘Born of Water and Spirit.’” 388.



the origins of African Pentecostalism. J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, for example, states that African prophets are the precursor of African Pentecostalism. He contends that, before the arrival of classical Pentecostals in Africa, African Christian prophetic figures such as William Wade Harris of Ghana, Simon Kimbangu of Congo, and many others “challenged Africans to throw away their traditional resources of supernatural succor and turn towards the living God of the Bible.”¹⁵ Moreover, these same prophets knew and taught that only the living God could deliver people from the terror of witchcraft, medicines, and evil spiritual powers. In other words, Pentecostalism existed in Africa before the arrival of the Westerners because Africans spoke in tongues even before they encountered the missionaries.¹⁶

On the other hand, other scholars link the origins of African Pentecostalism with the Azusa revival in the United States in 1906. Carl-Erik Sahlberg observes that fifteen years after the Azusa revival, Pentecostalism “felt itself mature to enter an external missionary engagement.”¹⁷ Center for Development and Enterprise support this view as they note that,

The Pentecostal movement emerged in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1901 students at the Bible College in Topeka, Kansas, founded by the preacher Charles Parham prayed to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. Parham then moved to Houston, Texas, where William Seymour, an African-American preacher, was allowed to listen to his Bible classes. Seymour went to Los Angeles, where his preaching helped to spark the Azusa Street Revival, a series of revivalist gatherings held from 1906 to about 1915.¹⁸

Whereas the above debate is valid and may be endless, this research does not attempt to argue against or for the origins of African Pentecostalism. Whether African Pentecostalism originated from America, Europe, or Africa, our interest is its presence and growth in Africa and how it can benefit from Charles Nyamiti’s theological work. Studies show that Pentecostalism has been the fastest-growing denomination globally since the period of Postcolonialism in the 1960s. Figures indicate that the Pentecostal movement has increased from 58 million in 1970 to 635 million followers in 2020, and the Global South Pentecostalism represents 86% of all Pentecostals

¹⁵ Ibid., 388.

¹⁶ Ogbu Kalu. *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, (Oxford, University Press, 2008), 4-11.

¹⁷ Carl-Erick Sahlberg, *The Pentecostal Movement*, (Nairobi, Evangel Publishing House, 1985), 51.

¹⁸ Center for Development and Enterprise (CDE), *Under the Radar: Pentecostalism in South Africa and Its Potential Social and Economic Role*. (Johannesburg: Center for Development and Enterprise, 2008), 10.



worldwide.¹⁹ The question may be raised: what can this movement learn from the ongoing theological dialogue on African theology, especially from scholars such as Charles Nyamiti? The subsequent sections respond to this question by indicating the relevance of Nyamiti's work to African Pentecostalism.

Overview of the Nature of the Pentecostal Movement in Africa

As alluded to earlier, the origin and identity of Pentecostalism in Africa have been debatable subjects. Notable African scholars insist that Pentecostalism existed in Africa long before the coming of the European missionaries. Ogbu Kalu, as previously stated, argues that African Pentecostal believers spoke in tongues even before encountering the missionaries. If this is true, then it is unfair to credit American and European revivals as the 'mother' of African Pentecostalism.²⁰ Asamoah-Gyadu maintains that the forerunners of African Pentecostalism were local prophets, "many of whom were persecuted out of historic mission denominations for pursuing spiritualities sometimes scandalously perceived by church authority as belonging to the 'occult.'" It is impossible to trace African Pentecostalism without intersecting with African prophets like William Wade Harris of Ghana, Simon Kimbangu of Congo, and many others.²¹

Undoubtedly, African Pentecostal prophets were influenced by the mission churches. The passion of the African independent churches, for example, was to restore "to the African church the vitality of the presence of the Holy Spirit, which was seen as accounting for the "dry denominationalism" of the mission churches."²² AIC teachings centered on healing as a priority activity, although some members deviated and searched for traditional healing.²³

A Synopsis of African Pentecostal Theology and Praxis

Dena Freeman observes that at the core of Pentecostal theology are four critical elements of doctrine which stress that a) Jesus saves, b) Jesus heals, c) Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit,

¹⁹ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, "Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity," *Gordon Conwell*, last modified May 13, 2020, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/pentecostal-charismatic-christianity/>.

²⁰ Ogbu Kalu. *African Christianity: An Introduction*, (Oxford, University Press, 2008), 4-11

²¹ Asamoah-Gyadu, "Born of Water and Spirit," 390.

²² *Ibid.*, 390.

²³ *Ibid.*



and d) Jesus is coming again. Also, according to Freeman, the theological emphasis in Pentecostalism is a personal transformation referred to as a ‘born again’ experience.²⁴

Moreover, American Pentecostal prosperity gospel theology has influenced African Pentecostalism theology, especially from the 1980s. Historically, earlier Pentecostalism promoted an ascetic approach to the material world, but modern Pentecostalism has shifted the emphasis to material prosperity.”²⁵ This has been adopted mainly by neo-Pentecostalism. In Africa, the earliest proponent of the prosperity gospel is the Nigerian Pastor David Oyedepo, the founder of Winner’s Chapel, who Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth and Gloria Copeland significantly influenced. Prosperity gospel theology, according to Hagin, states that “poverty is the result of sin against God.”²⁶ The sin includes not tithing regularly and failing to apply divine laws that help one claim and receive material wealth from God.²⁷

Maria Frahm-Arp lists three types of the prosperity gospel: abilities prosperity, progress prosperity, and miracle prosperity. Abilities prosperity emphasizes exercising and developing personal abilities. Progress prosperity motivates members to believe that prosperity means progress, and miracle prosperity is the belief that one’s victories over spiritual powers determine spiritual growth.²⁸ Hence, prosperity theology encourages members to pray to Jesus for wealth and abundance and do their part by engaging in business and working hard. Also, believers are challenged to give out of their wealth on the principle that “give and you shall receive”²⁹ Freeman calls this “a new form of taxation in places where churches, rather than government, provide social service.”³⁰

Ogbu Kalu agrees with Freeman and Maria that the message of sowing and reaping that most African preachers propagate in the prosperity gospel does not have African roots. This approach is an American invention that started in the 1980s.³¹ He argues that “Pentecostal prosperity theology, when properly exegeted, is rich in its capacity to re-imagine the gospel from an indigenous idiom. Pentecostal theology does not encourage people to fold their arms and wait

²⁴ Dena Freeman, “The Pentecostal Ethic and the Spirit of Development,” 11-13.

²⁵ Ibid., 14.

²⁶ Maria Frahm-Arp, “Pentecostalism, Politics, and Prosperity in South Africa,” 3.

²⁷ Ibid., 3.

²⁸ Ibid., 5.

²⁹ Dena Freeman, “The Pentecostal Ethic and the Spirit of Development,” 15.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 256.



for manna from the skies ...”³² However, not all Pentecostals propagate the prosperity gospel. Classical Pentecostalism is balanced in teachings on the prosperity gospel because the pioneering missionaries laid solid doctrinal foundations.

Furthermore, theologians link African Pentecostalism with the African worldview or African primal religion. Ogbu Kalu, for example, holds that an indigenous/ traditional worldview shapes African Pentecostalism. Kalu states that “...Pentecostalism has grown because of its cultural fit into the indigenous worldview and its response to the questions raised within the interior of the worldviews.... indigenous worldview still dominates contemporary African experience and shapes the character of African Pentecostalism.”³³ He also argues that Pentecostal theology is grounded on both the African past and the present experiences of cultural forces. However, Pentecostalism actively engages in primal contexts, believing that there are powers behind manifestations of social, political, and even religious hierarchies. In this context, Pentecostal conduct deliverance ministries to expel evil spirits and refill people with a clean spirit so that people become truly human.³⁴

Regarding Pentecostal theology on the Holy Spirit, Veli-Matti Karkkanen contrasts it with non-Pentecostal theology. For non-Pentecostals, the Holy Spirit means just the presence; for the Pentecostals, the Holy Spirit implies empowerment that is manifested in spiritual gifts such as healing, speaking in tongues, and prophecy, among others. The most emphasized experience in Pentecostalism is speaking in tongues, commonly referred to as “initial physical evidence” or glossolalia. This doctrine is based on the book of Acts. Also, the capacity to engage in spiritual warfare is significant in African Pentecostalism.³⁵

The missing link in African Pentecostalism theology and praxis articulated above is the engagement of philosophical reasoning in dissecting African worldviews. It instead relies heavily on spiritual experiences and faith. Such an approach leads to a belief that some forms of affliction, illness, or misfortune, for example, are associated with ancestral spirits. These misfortunes may be manifested at a community or personal level and may include social unrest, economic failure, and high mortality rates among children. Thus, according to Karkkanen, an

³² Ibid., 262.

³³ Ibid., 170.

³⁴ Ibid., 170-72.

³⁵ Veli-Matti Karkkanen, “The Pentecostal Understanding of Mission,” in *Pentecostal Mission and Global Christianity*, Wonsuk Ma, Veli-Matti Karkkanen, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, (eds), (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 36.



African may engage a diviner who diagnoses the cause of the misfortunes and prescribes some curative measures to bring out protection over evil spirits.³⁶ Unlike Pentecostals, Charles Nyamiti uses philosophical reasoning to explore the spiritual world, offering a scholarly contribution worthy of examination.

Nyamiti's Theological Method

Charles Nyamiti's passion was to have an African theology that is scientifically authentic. His conviction was to "... see the metaphysical and critical way of thinking ... introduced in African theology and metaphysics."³⁷ Nyamiti reveals the reason behind this line of thinking, "We are moving to globalization, we are moving to what we call common culture, that is why African theology should try to build a theology which is really universal rather than local."³⁸ The motivation to engage in African theology started when Nyamiti was at Leuven University in Belgium. He met other African scholars who challenged themselves on the need to do African theology. Nyamiti's desire to do African theology was amplified by the writings of Pope John Paul II and the Vatican II council, which "prescribed the necessity of formulating African contextual theology."³⁹

Consequently, Nyamiti started using three main scientific methods to construct African theology: the comparative-dialogal, the apologetic, and the pedagogical. In a comparative approach, Nyamiti compares and contrasts the African worldview on subjects such as Trinity with biblical teachings. He believes this method helps to open a dialogue between various truths between Christian teachings and the teaching of African religion.⁴⁰ The apologetic approach articulates why Christian teachings face such resistance in African cultural settings. Using this method, Nyamiti believes that the Christian faith has been rejected in other parts of Africa because the missionaries distanced themselves from the natives, despised the African traditional practices, and failed to demonstrate Christian love to African people practically.⁴¹ Finally, the

³⁶ Ibid., 177.

³⁷ Strathmore University, "The Amazing Charles Nyamiti."

³⁸ Strathmore University.

³⁹ Strathmore University.

⁴⁰ Charles Nyamiti, *African Tradition and the Christian God*, (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, n.d.), 4.

⁴¹ Nyamiti, *African Tradition*, 17.



pedagogical approach deals with solving a specific contextual problem by Christian principles or expounding Christian doctrine using philosophy and other sciences.⁴²

Charles Nyamiti uses the above philosophical techniques to analyze the traditional African worldview in the light of biblical revelation in a deeply scholarly style. His thinking trend is uncommon in Africa, as he confesses that he has been criticized for using abstract concepts instead of stories, proverbs, and sayings, to explain African reality. One of the early critics of Charles Nyamiti's theological approach is Micah Vahakangas, the first person to write his doctoral dissertation on the work of Nyamiti.⁴³ Vahakangas argues that Nyamiti's thinking contains an interplay between Western and African thought patterns because he uses Western interpretation methods to present African theology. In addition, he sees Nyamiti as a product of a mission-established church, so he (Nyamiti) cannot escape the impact of Western thought in his thinking.⁴⁴ Joel Mokhoathi raises a similar concern. He argues that Nyamiti tries to mingle the Bantu worldview with the Christian doctrine⁴⁵ by using philosophical inquiry.

In response to his critics, Nyamiti states that the same approach was used since the first century when the early church reached out to the pagans, where they encountered different Greek philosophies. According to Nyamiti, Greek philosophy was divided into many schools of thought, such as Aristotelianism and Stoicism. The church fathers adopted these philosophical methods to formulate Christian theology. Thomas Aquinas also used similar methods from his teacher, Albert the Great. Nyamiti reasons that the early church never condemned these methods, which he also tries to use; therefore, he is doing the right thing. He, however, admits that his method is not the only one; other methods could be employed in formulating theology.⁴⁶ For example, he argues that using a Western spoon to eat rice does not make the rice Western.⁴⁷

⁴² Ibid., 20-25.

⁴³ Strathmore University, "The Amazing Charles Nyamiti."

⁴⁴ Mika Vahakangas, In Search for Foundations for African Catholicism: Charles Nyamiti's Theological Methodology: (Brill, Boston, 1999), 277.

⁴⁵ Joel Mokhoathi, "(PDF) Jesus Christ as an Ancestor: A Critique of Ancestor Christology in Bantu Communities," ResearchGate, University of the Free State, 20 Apr. 2018, accessed October 8, 2022.

www.researchgate.net/publication/324680660_Jesus_Christ_as_an_Ancestor_A_critique_of_Ancestor_Christology_in_Bantu_Communities.

⁴⁶ Strathmore University, "The Amazing Charles Nyamiti."

⁴⁷ Francis Anekwe Oborji, "Nyamiti, Charles."



The Relevance of Nyamiti's Theological Method to African Pentecostalism

Based on Nyamiti's above arguments, the Pentecostal movement in Africa can learn an essential lesson: reasoning capacity is a God-given gift if applied to seek and glorify God; hence, it should not be underestimated at the expense of experiential knowledge. Admittedly, the relationship between philosophy and theology has faced a sharp debate over the centuries. For example, the early church fathers such as Tertullian did not see any common ground between philosophical reasoning on theological reflection. Yet, other Christian thinkers such as Augustine of Hippo held that "... philosophical reflection complemented theology, but only when these philosophical reflections were firmly grounded on a prior intellectual commitment to the underlying truth of the Christian faith."⁴⁸ St. Augustine of Hippo had a balanced view of using philosophy as a tool for theological reflection. Jesus commanded his disciples to love the Lord with all their hearts, strengths, and minds.⁴⁹

African Pentecostalism and Intellectualism

Conventionally, it has been held that Pentecostals neglect the application of rigorous intellectualism in the formulation of Christian theology and instead claim to rely on personal experience and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Nathan Chiroma mentions anti-intellectualism as one of the major challenges facing the church in the 21st century. He is saddened by the fact that "...many churches do not encourage intellectual curiosity, vibrant debate, and healthy questioning. They offer simplistic and unsatisfying answers to huge questions, and in so doing, they foreclose a whole arena (the life of the mind) wherein God can be worshipped and holy wonder cultivated."⁵⁰ Charles Nyamiti's work and methodical approach to theology is relevant to African Pentecostalism because it promotes intellectual curiosity, vibrant debate, and healthy questioning. Nyamiti's critical thinking and philosophical inquiry of doing African theology can stimulate curiosity in serious African Pentecostal theological students and even seasoned scholars to pay due attention to African worldviews and beliefs about God. African Pentecostals should remain open-minded and not ignore critical thinking in addressing pertinent African

⁴⁸ Michael J Murray, and Michael Rea. "Philosophy and Christian Theology." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 9 Aug. 2012, accessed October 11, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/christiantheology-philosophy/>

⁴⁹ Matthew 22:37 (NIV).

⁵⁰ Nathan Chiroma, "TH02 Contemporary Issues in Theology," Africa International University, PhD Seminar, Semester Two, 22 June 2020, Nairobi, Via Microsoft Teams.



theological issues. Only by such an attitude can African Pentecostal theologians participate and contribute to the theological conversation in Africa and beyond.

Two decades ago, Douglas Petersen observed that Pentecostal theologians face the challenge of keeping their head and heart together. That is, being intellectually honest and spiritually alive so that they adapt to the changing dynamics in their theological orientation to be relevant to their Pentecostal theology and mission.⁵¹ It is important to recognize that there are already African Pentecostal scholars who have endeavored to articulate what African Pentecostal is and its contribution to the theological discourse in the continent. The leading figures on this front are J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, E. Kingsley Larbi, and Ogbu Kalu. They apply intellectual vigor in responding to the changing theological paradigms of the twentieth century.⁵²

Nyamiti's Concept of Ancestorship

In his analogical method, Nyamiti views God as Ancestor. He uses Wanyamwezi of Tanzania, Kikuyu of Kenya, and Warundi of Burundi as his reference point. These three East African tribes consider the dead father or mother their true ancestors and occasionally offer them rituals. In this aspect, Nyamiti believes that the word ancestor “bears the closest analogy to the divine ancestorship.”⁵³ Nyamiti firmly holds that in an African worldview, the dead parent continues to live even after death and is interested in the offspring's welfare. In other words, death brings the deceased closer to God, resulting in a new relationship between the ancestor and his children. If the parent died in God's friendship, he has a special love for their children and can help them through their intercession with God.⁵⁴ Matters may worsen if the living children ignore the dead parent. In such a case, the parent may become angry and can only be appeased by prescribed rituals. The ancestors can visit the living in different forms, such as snakes or lizards. Hence, ancestral spirits are a source of supernatural power and can be anywhere, but they prefer places like trees, graveyards, and shrines. The ancestors are mediators between God and the living and

⁵¹ Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen, eds., *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Oxford: Regnum, 1999), 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵³ Nyamiti, *African Tradition*, 45.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*



the source of tradition and stability. In short, “After death [Africans] remain human, but with new qualities.”⁵⁵

Similarly, Ogbu Kalu discusses the concept of ancestorship but uses the term ‘the living dead’ whereby if an important person dies, they are considered alive in the spirit world. It is this belief that causes some cultures to bury slaves with kings so that to continue serving them in the spirit world. Death, therefore, is not the end. Instead, it is the beginning of another life whereby the living dead, ancestors, assume the guardian role of the earthly family. This concept reinforces Africans to live a good and ethical life because they desire to live to old age to qualify in death as ancestors. Like Nyamiti, Kalu observes that if the family mistreats or does not respect the departed family member, the ancestors will visit them to demand their respect by inflicting torment on the living members of the family.⁵⁶ To affirm what Nyamiti and Kalu narrate above, growing up in a traditional setting, at a very young age, I spotted a big black snake in our small grass-thatched house in the rural area. Instead of killing the snake, my parents provided it with milk and flour and left it alone. Later, the snake crawled away and disappeared. Surprisingly, when I inquired about it, my parents claimed that an ancestor had come to greet the family. According to my parents’ worldview, if the snake had been killed, then a curse would have befallen our family. As an African, this idea of ancestorship is not just a theory but a deeply held belief in many African communities.

Relevance of Ancestorship to African Pentecostalism

The concept of ancestorship is controversial among Pentecostals and mainline evangelical churches. Joel Mokhoathi argues that the idea of ancestorship in the mainline churches is divisive – some are against it, others are neutral, and others are sympathetic towards it.⁵⁷ Most Pentecostals dismiss it because they equate it with the doctrine of veneration, which separates Pentecostalism from Catholicism. Allan Anderson states that research has revealed that the majority of members of Christian churches do not accept ancestor veneration. He concludes that Nyamiti’s teachings on ancestors seem more theoretical than practical for most Christian communities, except within Roman Catholic, as it does not resonate with their daily

⁵⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁶ Ogbu U. Kalu, “Preserving a Worldview: Pentecostalism in the African Map of the Universe,” in *Pneuma Volume 24, no 22* (2002), 119.

⁵⁷ Joel Mokhoathi, “(PDF) Jesus Christ as an Ancestor,” 10.



experiences.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the researcher maintains that ancestorship in Africa is a practical reality in many communities.

It should be mentioned that the researcher does not romanticize the doctrine of ancestorship. Instead, the researcher believes in what Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:5, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus....” It must be borne in mind, however, that Nyamiti wrestles with this subject from a high-level intellectual engagement to compare African traditional beliefs on God and biblical understanding. He acknowledges some differences between the African traditional ancestral worldview and divine ancestorship. For example, he argues that human ancestor usually has many descendants; however, Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, is the only divine descendant, and in God, there is no before and after, as there is with human ancestry. More importantly, the communication between traditional ancestors and their descendants is usually through ritual, while the communication between the Father and the Son is that of nature and life.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, Nyamiti does not give biblical references to support his arguments.

Again, it is worth noting that Nyamiti attempts to formulate African theology using a philosophical approach – a challenge that most African Pentecostal scholars have not ventured into. Nyamiti is “the vibrant pioneer of enculturated African Christian theology.”⁶⁰ It has been noted that African Pentecostalism tends to be anti-African culture⁶¹ and the expense of their emphasis on personal conversion experience and the manifestation of spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues.⁶² In his article, *The Gospel and Culture in Pentecostal Mission*, Allan Anderson asks, “The inevitable question to be asked in assessing Pentecostalism in Asia, Africa,

⁵⁸ Allan Anderson, “Moya: The Holy Spirit in an African Context,” (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 1991), 91, quoted in Joel Mokhoathi, “Jesus Christ as an Ancestor: A Critique on Ancestor Christology in Bantu Communities.” *Pharos Journal of Theology* 99 (2018): 2–17. accessed October 26, 2022.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324680660>

⁵⁹ Nyamiti, *African Tradition*, 47, 48.

⁶⁰ Francis Anekwe Oborji, “Nyamiti, Charles.”

⁶¹ Mercy Oduyoye Amba, “The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman.” In *Cross Currents* 47. No 4. Winter 1997–1998, 493–504, quoted in Mari-Anna Pöntinen. *African Theology as Liberating Wisdom Celebrating Life and Harmony in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana*. (Brill, 2013), 5.

⁶² Afe Adogame & James V. Spickard (eds.), *Religion Crossing Boundaries. Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora*. (Leiden: Brill., 2010), 6, Quoted in Mari-Anna Pöntinen. *African Theology as Liberating Wisdom Celebrating Life and Harmony in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana*. (Brill, 2013), 5.



and Latin America is to what extent is this an enculturated Christianity ...?”⁶³ Anderson observes that African Pentecostalism is in constant encounter either the spirit world and it bases its practices on the Bible and not on traditional religions.⁶⁴

The above observation from Anderson is correct because the point of departure between Nyamiti and African Pentecostalism is that Pentecostals tend to explore the spiritual world by faith, based on special revelation, whereas Nyamiti enters into that realm by using philosophical reasoning, which we may call general revelation. Nyamiti tries to be as objective as possible, whereas Pentecostals remain experientially subjective in their approach. Intellectual analysis of the world of ancestors and spirits can enrich the Pentecostals’ spiritual approach and equip believers with solid biblical teachings. It is common to hear some Pentecostals associating the misfortunes befalling them with spiritual torments from their ancestors. The Swahili word for ancestral spirits is *roho za mababu na mabibi or mizimu*,⁶⁵ a term that usually carries a negative connotation.⁶⁶ Hence, it should not be taboo for Pentecostals to provide a critical theological response based on sound hermeneutical principles on this subject to empower Christians from the fear of *roho za mababu na mabibi or mizimu*.

Nyamiti’s Concept of Trinity

Nyamiti uses the ancestorship analogy to describe the Father and Son relationship. According to Nyamiti, the Son descended from the Father, and through the Spirit, the Father and the Son can mystically communicate in love, thus, to fulfill the ancestral obligations. Unlike the traditional African view of ancestry, Nyamiti argues the basis for a biblical understanding of ancestorship is generation and the sanctity of the Father. In the African traditional worldview, for example, the parent who dies with bad moral character does not fit to be called an ancestor.⁶⁷ What confuses, however, in Nyamiti’s analysis of the Trinity is that he seems to treat the Holy Spirit as a lesser member of the Trinity. The following quote affirms this claim,

⁶³ Allan Anderson, “The Gospel and Culture in Pentecostal Mission on the Third World: A Paper Presented at the 9th Conference of the European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association.” Selly Oak Centre for Missiology and World Christianity University of Birmingham, July 2019.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 225, 226.

⁶⁵ The phrase literally means the spirits of great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers.

⁶⁶ Based on my experience, when a Pentecostal hears or mentions the word ancestral spirits, or *roho za mababu na mabibi or mizimu*, they refer to bad/evil spirits which are the source of evil or misfortunes.

⁶⁷ Nyamiti, *African Tradition*, 48.



The title which the Father has for sacred communication with his Son demands the presence of the Holy Spirit, through whom this loving and mutual communication takes place. The divine Ancestor [God] and Descendant [the Son] are *logically* prior to the actual communication in love and are thus prior to the Holy Spirit. ...Considered as produced by the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit appears as the *fruit* of the mutual love of them both.⁶⁸

Based on this quotation, it is possible to conclude that Nyamiti implies that the Holy Spirit is only a medium through which the Father and the Son interact or communicate. This is because Nyamiti mentions the Holy Spirit in the ancestorship relationship as the “fruit” of the mutual love of the Father and the Son. In other words, the Holy Spirit is the product of the relationship between the Father and the Son. This may be puzzling to a Pentecostal whose theological orientation on the doctrine of the Trinity differs from Nyamiti’s presentation. Nevertheless, although Pentecostals emphasize the experience of the Holy Spirit, they still firmly hold that Trinity consists of three equal persons eternally co-existing yet with distinctive personalities.

Nyamiti further developed an African Christology whereby he calls Jesus a “Brother-Ancestor” because he restored our lostness into a divine adoptive state by bridging the gap that separated us from our heavenly ancestor, which was caused by the fall. According to Nyamiti, Jesus achieved this objective by assuming our humanity through the hypostatic union and became our Brother-Ancestor forever. Because of this act of Christ, we have become his descendants; hence, he made it possible for us to access the Spirit whom Christ offers as a gift. Through Christ, it is now possible for us to partake in the Trinitarian life.⁶⁹ Nyamiti discusses trinitarian relationships whereby, like the African ancestor, God the Father is also the Giver of life to his Son. At the same time, the Son is the perfect image of the Father. Trinity is a relationship of love between the Father and the Son through the communion of the Holy Spirit through the process he calls spiration.⁷⁰

The Relevance of Nyamiti’s Concept of Trinity to African Pentecostalism

Nyamiti’s arguments on Trinity may be unconvincing to a Pentecostal whose concept of the Trinity is comprehended by faith. Dominic Obielosi and Ani Don Pedro rightly critique Nyamiti’s approach to theology because he is concerned with building up African systematic

⁶⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁹ Francis Anekwe Oborji, “Nyamiti, Charles.”

⁷⁰ Nyamiti, *African Tradition*, 47-49.



theology, which takes as its primary data the Bible, tradition, and history in which philosophy plays a significant role.⁷¹ Mika Vahakangas considers Nyamiti's theological influence as an example of creative African academic thinking because the outcomes of his methodology are based on Bantu cosmology. Nyamiti's attempt to build African theology is unique as it has produced notable practical results in African understanding of the mysteries of the Christian faith.⁷² African Pentecostals may not agree with Nyamiti's concept of the Trinity; however, they may be humbled by the mysteries of this subject and appreciate Nyamiti's attempt to unveil it from African perspectives using philosophical reasoning. Nonetheless, the researcher agrees with the above scholars that Nyamiti does not base his arguments on sound biblical exegesis; instead, he relies heavily on philosophy – general revelation – hence it is biblically and theologically wanting.

Nyamiti's Concept of Ecclesiology

Regarding the doctrine of ecclesiology, Nyamiti believes that the church is an extension of the incarnation of God's Son. He believes that God, as a true ancestor of the Christian community, loves the members of the church, but if he is forgotten, he becomes angry. Hence, just like traditional ancestors, God must be appeased through rituals and prayers. Nyamiti uses a Catholic concept of the sacraments, especially the eucharist, which links Christ to his church as his basis of argument on divine ancestorship. Through Eucharist, Christ becomes the Mediator between God and people, thus the source of harmony. Furthermore, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ lead to a mystical relationship between God and the rest of human beings.⁷³

However, Nyamiti points out that the relationship between God and the Church is not based on human ancestry but rather on divine life because God's presence is more intimate than that of the ancestors. He argues that through Christ, God is the true Ancestor of His Church because all people are called to be sons (and daughters) of God in Christ, and the primary mission of Christ is to mediate divine ancestorship with all humanity.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Dominic Obielosi and Ani Donpedro, "A Quest for a Unique African Christian Theology and Methodology in the Light of Charles Nyamiti," *Mgbakoigba, Journal of African Studies*. 7, no. 1 (2017): 14–20. 14, accessed September 27, 2012. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/mjas/article/viewFile/160924/150483>.

⁷² Mika Vahakangas, *In Search for Foundations*, 287.

⁷³ Nyamiti, *African Tradition*, 47-49.

⁷⁴ Ibid.



Furthermore, Nyamiti views the church as a tripartite entity whereby Christ is an Ancestor of all members. In other words, members of the church are the descendants of Christ. Nyamiti refers to the triumphant church in heaven, the suffering Church in purgatory, and the militant Church on earth by the tripartite concept. Nyamiti used the capital “C” to refer to the church because he has the Roman Catholic Church in mind. In Nyamiti’s system of thought, Christ shares his ancestorship with the saints in heaven and purgatory, which include African ancestors who died in him. Because of this relationship, members of the triumphant church are expected to exercise their duties as individual believers through the incarnation, prophetic and priestly roles of healing ministry, and so on. By so doing, argues Nyamiti, the spirit of koinonia, which flows from the Trinitarian life, is put into action because the church continues the mystery of Christ in human communities.⁷⁵ The main criticism of this thinking is that,

Nyamiti has devoted less attention to the basic difference that exists between the baptized in Christ and the African ancestors. Those who make up the tripartite church are baptized in Christ. The members of the suffering or triumphant Churches are Christians who followed and bore witness to Christ, the risen Lord. But how the African ancestors, who neither witnessed the Paschal mystery nor are baptized in Christ, could be counted members of the tripartite church is not well developed in Nyamiti’s theology.⁷⁶

Relevance of Nyamiti’s Ecclesiology to African Pentecostalism

Nyamiti’s ecclesiology is based on the Roman Catholic theology of the church. It is, therefore, not easy to connect it with evangelicals’ or Pentecostals’ perspectives on ecclesiology because he lacks solid biblical references to back it up. However, Nyamiti’s philosophical presentation of ecclesiology is a wake-up call for African Pentecostals to consider articulating contextual Pentecostal ecclesiology grounded on sound biblical exegetical and hermeneutical processes and principles. Peter Althouse critiques Pentecostals by stating, “Pentecostals have been slow in their reflection and development of a Pentecostal ecclesiology....”⁷⁷ Nyamiti’s theology challenges the Pentecostals to desire to formulate African Pentecostal ecclesiology that honors biblical revelation but is also contextually relevant. No doubt to a Pentecostal that the church is an extension of Christ’s ministry on earth. The church is the Body of Christ, and God’s presence in

⁷⁵ Francis Anekwe Oborji, “Nyamiti, Charles.”

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Peter Althouse, “Towards a Pentecostal Ecclesiology: Participation in the Missional Life of the Triune God.” *Pentecostal Ecclesiology*, 2016, pp. 88–103., doi:10.1163/9789004317475_006.



the church cannot be compared with that of ancestral connection, as Nyamiti holds. The fact that the relationship between the church and Christ is a mystery is a point of departure between Nyamiti and the Pentecostals. Undeniably, the church shares Trinitarian life, which is made possible through the enablement of the Holy Spirit. As Althouse puts it, “The church is constituted by and participates in the triune God, who in self-differentiation between persons and simultaneously penetrate one another in perichoretic unity. The triune God establishes the framework for communal relationships in the body of Christ, the people of God, the fellowship of the saints.”⁷⁸ The church cannot exist outside of the mutual relationship with the Triune God. Jesus articulated this reality in John 15, where God is pictured as a gardener, Christ as the vine, and the disciples of Christ as branches.

There are divergent points between what Nyamiti presents about ecclesiology and the Pentecostals. As stated above, Nyamiti represents the Catholic view of Ecclesiology. One of the significant disagreements between Nyamiti and the African Pentecostals is the essence of the church. Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. Mackenzie state, “The doctrine of the church is a significant dividing line between Catholics and evangelicals.”⁷⁹ One sharp difference, which features in Nyamiti’s theology of ecclesiology, is “the Catholic claim to be one and true visible church united under the pope and the matter of the priestly power to transform the eucharist bread and wine in the actual body and blood of Christ and the special to forgive sin.”⁸⁰ The concept of the suffering church in purgatory, held by Nyamiti, is also a divisive doctrinal area between the Catholics and the Pentecostals. Geisler and Mackenzie dismiss this doctrine as they claim that it is anti-biblical because it goes contrary to the fundamental teachings of the Scripture. The researcher agrees with this position because these were some of the main issues that led to the Reformation and have continued to be a hot theological debate between the Catholics and the Protestants.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Norman Geissler and Ralph E. Mackenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 297.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 297.

⁸¹ Ibid., 355.



Conclusion

This paper has examined Charles Nyamiti's theological method in his attempt to construct African theology of ancestorship, Trinity, and ecclesiology using three philosophical techniques - the comparative-dialogal, the apologetic, and the pedagogical. In this approach, Nyamiti considers African ancestors as mediators between God and people. He also uses the ancestorship analogy to maintain that the Son descended from the Father, and through the Spirit, hence the Father and the Son can mystically communicate in love through the Spirit. Nyamiti's view of ecclesiology is that the church is an extension of the incarnation of God's Son; therefore, God is a true ancestor of the Christian community. The weakness of Nyamiti's scientific approach is that he relies heavily on philosophy at the expense of biblical revelation. The researcher does not agree entirely with Nyamiti's theological position on the subjects discussed in this paper but appreciates his theological method, although it is inadequate. While biblical revelation should be the basis of the formation of any Christian theology, philosophy is a tool that complements that effort. The Pentecostal movement in Africa can benefit from Nyamiti's work by critically applying biblical principles without neglecting philosophical inquiries in formulating Christian theology that is relevant to the African context.

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