

“CLOUD OF WITNESSES” IN HEBREWS 12:1 AND GANDA ANCESTORS: AN INCARNATIONAL REFLECTON¹

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Abstract

This paper investigates the “cloud of witnesses” in Heb 12:1 and outlines their role in inspiring the living in their race of faith. The “cloud of witnesses” refers to the departed faithful ancestors of Heb 11. A comparison is made with Ganda traditional beliefs in ancestors. The role of the Ganda ancestors in the life of the living parallels the inspirational role of the “cloud of witnesses in Heb 12:1. Jesus Christ is not contradicted by the principle of ancestorship in Christian theology. Ganda ancestors are acknowledged in the eucharistic celebration through incarnational theology for a full appreciation of the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ—the “chief ancestor”.

1. Introduction

This article is my humble contribution to the ongoing debate on the place of ancestors in the life of African Christians in general and that of the Ganda in particular. The Ganda² are one of the oldest and largest tribal systems in Uganda and have to a large extent preserved their cultural values through a strong monarchy. They are found in central Uganda. The majority of the Ganda Christians still hold strong beliefs in the ancestors. Such beliefs are not misguided and should not be judged or condemned as pagan. Parallels in acknowledging the role of ancestors in the lives of the

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² For the purposes of this paper I will use *Ganda* as an adjective. It is possible for one to speak of *Ganda* people, *Ganda* culture, *Ganda* language, *Ganda* sacrifice. Otherwise the people are called *Baganda* (singular *Muganda*) and the region where they are found is called *Buganda*.

living do exist for us in Heb 12:1. Besides, the principle of ancestorship in Christian theology does not contradict Jesus Christ—the Messiah. African Christians need not be ashamed of themselves for it is impossible (at least in the case of the Ganda) to disassociate ourselves from our roots—the ancestors. We need to identify with the ancestors in the expression and celebration of our Christian faith and life. One such celebration is the eucharist. The eucharist is a participatory celebration of the death of Christ. It is my considered view that it is at the celebration of the eucharist that the faithful ancestors ought to be acknowledged. A study of Heb 12:1 that follows below is one example that demonstrates the presence of ancestors in Christian theology.

2. “Cloud of witnesses” in Heb 12:1

In Heb 12:1-3, the writer using the category of sport likens the Christian walk to a race that requires steadfast endurance on the part of the participants. He states,

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart (NRSV).

This passage is important in the writer’s exhortation to his readers to hold firm to the faith in Jesus Christ, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”. The Greek word *τοιαυτοῦν* at the beginning of our text, often translated as “therefore then” qualifies this passage as the climax of what the writer has been narrating up to this point—particularly the better promises mentioned in Heb 11:39-40. This more than anything else establishes the connection between our text and Heb 11.

Following the above explanation, it becomes clear that the “cloud of witnesses” of Heb 12:1 refers to the heroes of faith mentioned in Heb 11. Using again the illustration of believers in Christ as competitors in a race, “the heroes of faith are like a crowd towering above the competitors. The picture of a cloud describing a crowded group of people is a common classical figure and expresses not only the great number of people, but also the unity of the crowd in their witness. As witnesses they affirm the truth of the matter”³—the once for all sufficiency of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Philip E. Hughes (1977, 453) has carefully categorized the heroes of faith into “four historical periods” as follows:

- (1) antediluvian (vv. 4-7) – Abel, Enoch, Noah;
- (2) pre-Mosaic (vv. 8-22) – Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph;
- (3) Mosaic (vv.23-29) – Moses himself;
- (4) Post-Mosaic (vv.30-38) – Rahab and a more general reference to the many other heroes of faith, some named but mostly unnamed, of the succeeding generations.

In the paragraphs that follow, I briefly explain why each of the heroes of faith is significant in the cloud of witnesses.⁴ Topping the list of examples of faith is Abel (Heb 11:4; cf. Gen 4:3-5). It is clear from this text that Abel is commended and “approved by God as righteous for offering a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain”.⁵ It is important to note that Abel is approved by God as righteous on the basis of his faith. Hughes is in my view right (based on Gen

³ F. Rienecker and C. Rogers (1980, 713). See further W. L. Lane (1991, 407-11) who points out the inspirational role of the heroes of faith. According to Lane (1991, 408), “In the New Testament, a witness is never merely a passive spectator but an active participant who confirms and attests the truth as a confessing witness ... The emphasis in Heb 12.1 thus falls on what Christians see in the *host of witnesses* rather than on what *they* see in Christians ... The appeal to their example is meant to inspire heroic Christian discipleship ... Christians can benefit from the testimonies of these Old Testament witnesses to the validity of faith as they exert themselves in the race of faith prescribed for them”.

⁴ This is not intended to be a protracted discourse of the merits and demerits of each hero of faith. That is far beyond the scope of this paper. Mention will only be made of what makes them significant in the “cloud of witnesses” of Heb 12:1.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of why God considered Abel’s offering as “a more acceptable sacrifice” than that of Cain see Hughes (1977, 453-57) and Bruce (1990, 281-84).

4:7) in concluding that the difference between Abel and Cain lay in “their inward disposition or motivation—Abel’s integrity of heart is really what mattered ... and leaves the faltering readers of the Epistle with an example of “trustful integrity even in the face of violence” (Hughes 1977, 454-55, 457; cf. Guthrie 1983, 228 and Hagner 1983, 184-85). Enoch for his part leaves the author’s audience with an enduring example of one “who pleased God” (Heb 11:5) and “walking with God” (Gen 5:18, 21-24). It is made clear in Heb 11:6 that without faith it is impossible to please God and so Enoch must have been a man of unwavering faith. As the writer of Hebrews has put it before, “the righteous one will live by faith” (Heb 10:38). The expression “Walking with God” is indicative of Enoch’s deep intimacy with God (Stedman 1992, 120). Enoch’s daily walk with God was so intimate that God took him to heaven (i.e. he never experienced death—cf. Heb 11:5). Bruce has clarified that “walking humbly with God”, together with the practice of justice and lovingkindness, is God’s fundamental requirement of human beings (Mic 6:8; see Bruce 1990, 286). Noah is in the rank of witnesses for his unquestioning obedience to the word of God (Gen 6-8). Noah took God by his word believing that he (God) would certainly do what he had promised. We read in Gen 6.22 that “Noah did all that God had commanded him”—he built an ark on dry land miles away from the sea shore when warned by God about an impending catastrophe of the flood due to the sinfulness of human beings. Noah is commended for his faith in God—faith that could indeed cause him to see the unseen (Heb 11:1).

Next in the catalogue of the heroes of faith is Abraham (Heb 11:8-10) who takes his place in the “cloud of witnesses” for his unwavering obedience to the promises of God in three major situations. First, at the age of 75 years, Abraham left for the promised land of Canaan—land he had never known or heard about. He left his comfort zone, leaving behind kinsfolk and a good future. He ventured into the unknown in obedience to God’s

command and promise (Gen 12). Second, Abraham believed God for a child even when Sarah his wife was past child bearing age (Gen 18:9-12; 21:1-7). Third, Abraham took a step of faith in obedience to God’s command and prepared to sacrifice Isaac, the son of promise (Gen 22). In all this, Abraham stands as an example of unquestioning obedience and faith in God. He indeed demonstrates that “obedience” and “faith” in God are inseparable (Bruce 1990, 291). In spite of her apparent doubt and disbelief (Gen 18:11-12), Sarah, Abraham’s wife is numbered among the heroes of faith. Sarah must have reconsidered her doubts following God’s soul searching question: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Gen 18:14 NIV). God was gracious to Sarah and fulfilled his promise (Gen 21:1). Isaac, Jacob and Joseph keep trusting God in the face of death (Heb 11:20-22). These three “clearly saw aspects of the future because they exercised faith in what was invisible at the present” (Stedman 1992, 127).

Moses’ life journey can indeed rightly be described as a journey of faith in God. Beginning with the faith of his parents in his infancy, to the departure from Egypt and the Exodus event all point to one whose life was characterized by unwavering faith in God. Next in the queue of the examples of faith is the surprising mention of Rahab, the harlot of Jericho (Bruce 1990, 318). Rahab provided sanctuary for the spies when Joshua sent them to spy on the city. Rahab’s faith in the God of Israel caused her to take the actions she took—actions that led to the preservation of her very life (Lightfoot 2002, 155; Bruce 1990, 318).

Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets are mentioned together. Gideon and Barak made military exploits for the people of God (Judg 7:19-25; 5:19). Samson who was deeply aware of the presence of the invisible God and his calling to be used by God defended the cause of the Israelites against the Philistines—almost single-handed (Bruce 1990, 321). Jephthah was a brave commander against the Ammonites (Judg 11:14-27). David, in spite of his weaknesses and sins is nevertheless to be remembered for his willingness and readiness to

repent and seek God's forgiveness. He too trusted in "God's providence and faithfulness" (Ibid., 321. Cf. 2 Sam 12:13; 24:10-14). Samuel who took the mantle of prophecy in his youth was there to give the children of Israel hope when the Ark of the Covenant was in the hands of the Israelites and when it was brought back. He was faithful to God up to his last days of life.

What follows is a category of unnamed heroes of faith. It is possible to work backwards to fill in the names of possible actors. Those who shut the mouth of lions possibly point to Daniel who was thrown in the Lion's den and trusted God to save him (Dan 6:22). Those who quenched the raging fire could be a reference to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were thrown into the blazing furnace for refusal to bow down and worship Nebuchadnezzar's image. They make a strong statement of faith in Dan 3:18. Those who escaped the edge of the sword could be a reference to prophets Elijah (1 Kgs 19:2-18), Elisha (2 Kgs 6:31 - 7:2), and Jeremiah (Jer 36:19, 26). Those who received their dead by resurrection may include the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:17-24) and the woman of Shunem (2 Kgs 4:17-37). The type of torture and suffering in Heb 11:35 b is similar to that described in 2 Maccabees. The prophet Jeremiah was stoned to death and the prophet Isaiah suffered the gruesome death of being sawn into two. It is probable that prophets Elisha, Elijah, and Ezekiel "went about in sheepskins and goatskins" (Bruce 1990, 329).

One linking strand among all these heroes of faith—"the cloud of witnesses" is that they all died in faith: none of them witnessed the fulfillment of what God had promised (Heb 11:13, 39). Nevertheless, it is said of all of them that God's promises were so real to them that none of them yielded to the hostile circumstances of their time. Like those competing in a marked race, they never gave up but pressed on to the finishing line—living in the fulfillment of those promises even when the reality of God's promises were still far removed from them. It is said of them, "All these died in faith, without having received the promises, but from

a distance they saw and greeted them” (Heb 11:13). Their examples are there to inspire the author’s audience to press on with the race of the Christian faith and not to give up (Heb 12.1).

So in Heb 12:1, we have an enduring example of the presence of ancestors in Christian theology. In the section that follows, I explore the Ganda traditional beliefs in ancestors. Additionally, the section covers the role of the Ganda ancestors in the life of the living and draws parallels with the inspirational role of the “cloud of witnesses in Heb 12:1.

3. Ganda ancestors: beliefs in and role of ancestors

I want to echo the words of Mbiti, who in writing about Christianity and East African Culture and Religions states, for the African “to live is to be religious, to die is to be religious still” (Mbiti 1968, 4). When you come in contact with the Ganda, you cannot fail to notice the reverence and care given to the dead and the honour with which the accompanying elaborate burial and post-burial (known as *okwabya-olumbe*) ceremonies are conducted. This reverence for the departed member of the family does not stop at the celebration of the last funeral rites (*okwabya-olumbe*) but continues to be extended to the spirit of the departed. I am making a deliberate use of the word “departed” and not “dead” because according to the Ganda concept of death, death is not thought of or understood as total annihilation but a moving on to another real sphere of life—the spirit realm of the departed ancestors. The existence in another form following death was a reality to the Ganda and all looked forward to living and moving in the next state (Roscoe 1911, 281).

The Ganda believed that when a person died, his/her soul (singular *muzimu*: plural *mizimu*) went to Ntanda first to give an account of itself and its deeds in the flesh to Walumbe (the god of disease and death). When this was done and after its respects to

Walumbe, the *muzimu*⁶ returned to his/her own clan, so as to be near the grave in which the body was laid. Among the Ganda, the spirit (*muzimu*) of the dead was thought to remain attached to the lower jaw. Quite often the lower jaw was detached from the remains and placed in the shrine dedicated to that particular ancestor. The *muzimu*, according to the Ganda was the transformation of the living following death and was considered to be immortal (see Kyewalyanga 1976, 107 and Welbourn 1962, 177; Mbiti 1990, 86 calls *mizimu* the living-dead). According to Kyewalyanga, “It was supposed that the spirit (*muzimu*) of the deceased retained all the qualities of the living; they carried into their future state their physical and their moral character” (Kyewalanga 1976, 107). No wonder, any form of mutilation was taboo among the Ganda. One would rather die of a sick leg or arm than have it amputated for fear of appearing in the next world without it. One with a missing limb or any organ of his / her body would lose the opportunity to exercise full powers in the next world (Roscoe 1977, 281). Roscoe suggests that the spirits of the departed relatives were the most venerated class of religious objects among the Ganda, adding that, “the power of the ghosts for good or evil was incalculable”.⁷

Furthermore, the *mizimu* were believed to have wants and needs just as the living. It was believed that *mizimu* suffered cold and thirst. They had emotions and could consequently get angry and inflict disease, misfortunes and even death upon the living relatives if their wants were not met. So they were not distant

⁶ See Roscoe (1911, 285-286). John V. Taylor (1958, 203) noted that there was a difference in understanding of the word “soul” or “spirit” between the missionaries and the way it was understood among the Ganda. For the Christian missionaries, “the concept of soul and spirit originally bore a purely metaphysical sense (*omwoyo* = spiritual character; *obulam* = life), or a purely physical meaning (*emmeeme* = sternal cartilage, *omutima* = heart; both, *per ext.* = seat of the emotions)”. But Taylor observed “the traditional Kiganda conception of man saw him, rather as the ancient Hebrews did, as an essentially this-worldly creature, consisting of a material body in which was a semi-material *muzimu*”.

⁷ Roscoe (1911, 273). In this study I have used the expressions “spirit”, “shade” instead of the expression “ghost” which is often loaded with negative Western connotations about the African ancestors or living dead as Mbiti calls them.

beings, they were thought to live in close association with relatives who were living. Some of the obvious demands of the *muzimu* were that relatives handle the dead body in a fitting manner soon after death—they should not have been neglected when the person was alive and sick; that the burial and post-burial ceremonies be carried out meticulously, and that their graves be properly tended and not allowed to be overgrown with weeds (Roscoe 1911, 286; Kyewalyanga 1976, 107). If there was this kind of neglect, the *muzimu* would get very angry and would only be appeased by an offering of a goat or cow. Animals that were offered to shades were never killed but were allowed to roam around the vicinity of the shrine. It was not uncommon for the heir of the deceased to inquire from the spirit medium on how best to please the *muzimu* of the dead (Taylor 1958, 207). As already mentioned, according to Ganda traditional belief, the spirit of the dead (*muzimu*) was always attached to the lower jawbone. If the jawbone was moved, the *muzimu* would follow it. The shrines of *mizumu* were built near the graves and it was in these small shrines that relatives placed the regular little offerings of coffee berries, beer, clothing and occasionally a chicken.⁸

Graves were often dug in the gardens of plantains. So plantains and trees were thought of as favorite places for *mizimu*. Shades were particularly thought to be most available at midday and children were often forbidden to go out playing in the gardens at noon when the sun shone brightly. When the wind suddenly started blowing causing the leaves of trees or banana leaves to rattle, the *mizimu* were said to be talking or passing by. When there was a whirlwind lifting spirals of dust and leaves, the *mizimu* were said to be at play or passing by. Even adults did not go to the gardens at the heat of the day unless they had to (Taylor 1958, 207; Roscoe 1911, 282).

⁸ Roscoe (1911, 286). Sometimes (and this was only in a few cases), the lower jawbone of a noted chief would be removed and placed in some special shrine of the family away from the grave.

Mizimu were thought to be both benevolent and malevolent. The most troublesome *muzimu* was always that of one's paternal aunt (*Ssenga*). But *mizimu* were believed to be benevolent too. They were kind and of good will to the relatives—assisting family members and the clan in various ways. Every good fortune was attributed to the influence of the gods and so was misfortune. To this end, the *mizimu* were highly esteemed among the Ganda. It is important to note that the *mizimu* “of kings were placed on an equality with the gods, and received the same honour and worship; they foretold events concerning the State, and advised the living king, warning him when war was likely to break out” (Roscoe 1911, 283).

The dead visited the living in a variety of ways. The commonest way in which the *mizimu* manifested and demonstrated their power was by possessing a living person. According to Taylor (1958, 208), possession took three major forms:

There is that which is regarded as a malevolent attack from which the victim can only be saved by the use of supernatural means of exorcism. There is possession of a *muzimu* of a dead king, which is regarded as a call to the individual to dedicate himself or herself to lifelong service at the royal shrine. And there is supernatural possession of a medium for purposes of divination.⁹

Besides possession, the spirits of the dead (*mizimu*) appeared to the living through dreams (known as *birooto*). *Mizimu* could also appear to the living in form of human beings or even as animals (Kyewalyanga 1976, 109). The *muzimu* could also send illness or fortune without necessarily appearing to the individual.

Ganda were mainly preoccupied with *mizimu* of relatives since *mizimu* of neighbours or unknown person (s) would never have any influence on anybody: whether for good or for evil. But the *muzimu* of a relative had unlimited range of activity in the life of

⁹ “It is said that a *muzimu* cannot possess anyone with whom it has no personal acquaintance, but the victim may not know whose spirit has possessed him and will need to consult a diviner to find out that.”

an individual—and this created a lot of fear and anxiety in the members of the respective family and clan. On the malevolence and benevolence of *mizimu*, Kyewalyanga (1976, 109) sums it up as follows:

The hostility of the spirit of a close relative could depend upon a wish to avenge the fate, which has put him in the situation in which he finds himself, or for any maltreatment, which he had to suffer while still alive. The spirit of one’s paternal aunt (*Ssenga*) was thought to be the most troublesome, her malice venting itself more especially on her brother’s children, but the spirit of a parent, paternal and maternal grandparents, and of great grandparents are mentioned as returning to set right the footsteps of one who has strayed from the path of wisdom. . . . A spirit of an ancestor, which is no longer dangerous to the relatives but is only willing to help them, is deified by the people and is invested with supernatural powers. A spirit, which had reached the status of “*lubaale*”, was invoked and asked for help; for example, he would be requested to cure some diseases, to grant fertility and richness, and to protect one’s family.¹⁰

Whereas Southwold acknowledges that the shades of the dead were greatly feared in Buganda since they could punish the living who offended them by neglect or sin (hence the need to placate them with offerings), he contends that one can not speak of an established ancestor cult among the Ganda. The nearest to an ancestor cult would be the remembrance of past kings if such was to be considered as one (Southwold 1965 112-3).

4. Ganda ancestors and Jesus Christ

One regrettable blunder of the early missionaries to the Ganda was the futile plan and attempts to sever the bond between the living Ganda and the ancestors. This is not intended to be a protracted discourse about ancestors among the Ganda, but as demonstrated

¹⁰ A *muzimu* would be invoked as follows: *Gwe mukadde waffe, Jjajjaffe! Olaba ffe abaanabo bwetufanana era nobuzibu bwetulimu, tukubagize, ffe abaanabo tuwonye endwadde eza buli ngeri nze (gundi) byenetaaga (kinonakiri)*. Literally, “You are our elder /parent our grand parent! You see us your children beset by these our predicaments, console us, we your children, and beseech you to heal our varied diseases. I (so and so) I need (this and that)”.

in their daily life today, the Ganda are so inextricably linked with the ancestors that any attempt to deny them a relationship with the ancestors is tantamount to denying them life itself. The individual, family, clan can not exist apart from the good will and continual support from the ancestors. Magesa is not exaggerating when he states, “Ancestors in Africa are the “principle” or “source” of personal, family and community life” (Magesa 2004, 112). John Lukwata (2003, 8-9) writing about ancestors in the African worldview states

Ancestors are believed to have continuous influence over the living members of their immediate kinship unit. Their influence can be positive or negative depending on the conduct of the living. They are believed to be the proprietors of the land, and are responsible for promoting the fertility of human beings and that of the earth and the growth of crops.

According to Francis Xavier Mulambuzi (1997, 75-76),

Many Baganda continue to believe in their ancestors even when they convert to a new religion like Christianity. ... It is their ancestors (benevolent) who keep them from death, diseases, accidents and show interest in what they do and even make them succeed in their endeavours. God may be there, but He is not as close to them as the ancestors, whom they can turn to whenever there is a crisis.

In interacting with the Ganda, one is immediately struck by the high level of consciousness and awareness of the ancestors. Every Ganda is believed to live under the watchful eye of the ancestor (s). At church festivals when food is being served, if by accident some of it drops on the floor, it is not uncommon to hear one remark, “that is for the ancestors” or “the ancestors are hungry”.

It was the responsibility of the Ganda in ordinary life, to keep the ancestors most favourable to the living through the offering of sacrifices. Now one can not ignore this whole realm of ancestral spirituality that so dominates the Ganda worldview. I do not here want to enter the discussion that seeks to compare the ancestors with the saints because I do not think that such a comparison is

helpful.¹¹ My submission is that the place to begin is with the incarnate Christ. The risen Lord incarnates in all cultures to identify with them. Among the Ganda it is hard to conceive of fullness of life without the ancestors given their role and influence in the life of the living.¹² Magesa has rightly stated that, “Jesus Christ is not contradicted by this principle of ancestorship in Christian theology, but is rather vividly expressed in and by the category. As an ancestor, the Christian vocation toward life in God cannot be conceived apart from Jesus” (Magesa 2004, 112). Jesus the Ancestor is the source of the unique and fullness of life (Heb 9; Magesa 2004, 112; cf. John 3:16; 10:10). This fullness (wholesome) life he confers to all who put their trust in him (Heb 10:19-23, 35-39).

Kwame Bediako has suggested ways in which Jesus Christ can be appropriated as Ancestor in African Christology. He states, “Christ, by virtue of his Incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension into the realm of spirit-power, can rightly be designated, in African terms, as Ancestor, indeed Supreme Ancestor”.¹³

¹¹ A lot has been written in the past to draw a parallel between African ancestors and Christian saints with an aim to harmonize their role as mediators particularly in Roman Catholic Theology. Most recently Magesa (2004, 240-41) has with renewed vigor espoused this view. But as he admits, “African ancestors are indigenously perceived to have more power and more direct influence on the living than are the saints in Catholicism” (, 241). Besides, it is to be noted that the Ganda pantheon of deities (*balubaale* and all ancestral spirits) were never thought of as mediators acting on behalf of the Supreme Being. Like Xhosa ancestors, Ganda ancestors were not intermediaries. Sacrifices made to the ancestors were offered to them in their own right as deities capable of responding independently to the prayers / petitions of the living. This is why Lukwata is right in describing the ancestors as “proprietors” though he still maintains they have an intermediary role as well (Lukwata 2003, 8-9). While this may be true in other African societies, my argument is that this is not the case with the Ganda.

¹² The role and influence of the ancestors in the life of the living among the Ganda has been discussed in the sections above. Sacrifices are often offered to them to keep them in a favourable position toward the living and to thank them for favors received. Also see further Kyewalyanga (1976, 122-123, 275-276, 280, 281, 283, 285, 288) for information on pilgrimages to tombs of ancestors, prayers, invocations, appeals to ancestors, sacrifices, offerings, libations to ancestors, veneration of ancestors.

¹³ Bediako (1995, 217); but he has clarified the place and significance of the “natural” ancestors as follows: “Because ancestors, even in their realm of spirit existence, remain in African understanding essentially human just like ourselves, they cannot therefore ultimately be rivals of Christ in Christian consciousness. Just as there exists a clear distinction between God and

Magesa (2004, 112), quoting the work of Francois Kabasele Lumbala, gives functional reasons for considering Jesus as an Ancestor in African Christology as follows:

First, Jesus Christ is the ancestor because he mediates life. Second, Jesus Christ is the ancestor because he is present among the living. Third, Jesus Christ, the ancestor, is at the same time the eldest. Fourth, Jesus Christ is the ancestor because he is the mediator between God and human beings and within human community.¹⁴

Magesa sounds a legitimate note of caution here against making a simplistic comparison between Jesus and the ancestors. Fundamental is the fact that the ancestral aspect and activity of African ancestors fall below that of Jesus because the former are essentially human while Jesus is divine. But he suggests that the significance of this is to be seen in, “the dynamic interaction between them where the activity of the one (Jesus) is realized in conceptual and practical idiom of the other (African ancestral spirituality and religiosity)” (Magesa 2004, 112). To me this is the essence of incarnational inculturation. The Ganda do not need “new eyes” and a “new mind” in order for them to see and understand the sacrificial work of Christ. Christ is incarnate in them and they are able to see him, understand him, relate with him from the point of view of their culture (in this case their traditional religious experience). To ask them to denounce this is to ask them to do the impossible—how on earth can one denounce or abandon himself or herself?

So if the idea of ancestral spirituality is not repugnant and does not in any way substantially contradict Jesus Christ, how is ancestral spirituality to be reflected in the Ganda Christian spirituality. For me this is where the celebration of the eucharist comes in handy. This is where the death of Christ “the Chief

divinities, so also there exists a qualitative distinction between Christ as Ancestor and natural ancestors” (, 217-8).

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion see further Francois Kabasele Lumbala (1998, 44-50).

ancestor” is celebrated. This way, the eucharistic celebration would even be made meaningful to the Ganda. But how is one to do all this? There are a number of options that could be considered. These options should not be thought of as being mutually exclusive.

First, the ancestors’ presence at the eucharistic celebration need to be acknowledged at various stages as demonstrated in the following extracts. Tovey makes reference to the Experimental Liturgy for Archbishop Janani Luwum Theological College (1985). This liturgy was authorized for use in the College in Northern Uganda:¹⁵

Brothers and sisters, we who are living on earth are not the only followers of Christ; many have already left this world and are now with God. Together we make up one great family. Let us join ourselves with them ...

Apostles and evangelists (N), witnesses of the resurrection, you are with us as we celebrate this Holy Communion.

You’re with us. You’re with us. Praise the Lord.

With saints and martyrs the following is said:

And you, our ancestors in the faith (N), who have served God with a good conscience, you are with us as we celebrate this Holy Communion.

You’re with us. You’re with us. Praise the Lord.

The Holy Communion liturgy for the Church of the Province of Kenya has also acknowledged and made provision for the ancestors.¹⁶ The introduction of the creed has the words, “We stand together with Christians throughout the centuries, and throughout the world today ...” The fourth intercessory prayer states in part, “... we heartily thank you for our faithful ancestors and all who have passed through death to new life of joy in our heavenly home”. The Sanctus reads:

Therefore with angels, and archangels, faithful ancestors and all in heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name, forever praising you and saying

...

¹⁵ P. Tovey (2004, 146); cf. his MPhil thesis at the University of Nottingham (1988).

¹⁶ See *A Modern Service of Holy Communion* (1989, 18, 23, 28, 33).

The third post-communion prayer acknowledges that the same God is God of the ancestors: “O God of our ancestors, God of our people, before whose face the human generations pass away”.

The African Eucharistic Prayer (for the Roman Catholic Church) drawn to address African categories of thought and forms of expression goes beyond asserting the presence of the ancestors to their invocation (Shorter 1970, 143-8; for a critique of this prayer see Uzukwu 1979, 338-9). Three years later, three more African Eucharistic prayers were drawn up using traditional prayers from Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania (Shorter 1973, 152-160). Again in these prayers, the ancestors are given prominence as part of the community of the living and in position to help them. An extract based on a Kikuyu prayer reads in part:

We beseech you,
And in this we are in harmony
With the spirits of our ancestors;
We ask you to send the Spirit of life
To bless and sanctify our offerings,
That they may become for us the Body and Blood
Of Jesus, our Brother and your Son (Ibid., 155).

The section in the Tanzanian Eucharistic prayer based on a Luguru prayer invokes the ancestors and petitions them to come to the aid of the living. After entreating God the Father for mercy, the prayer continues thus:

Also you, our Grandparents
Who sleep in the place of light,
All ancestors, men and women, great and small,
Help us, have compassion on us,
So that we can also sleep peacefully (Ibid., 157).

At the meeting of the Association of Episcopal Conferences of East Africa (AMECEA) in 1969 a special liturgy for celebrating the Eucharist was drawn. The liturgy began as follows:

Here is your food [*they are addressing God*]
Here is your drink
All of this is yours, before it is ours ...
We celebrate a feast,
But it is a feast of thanksgiving,
We thank God.
O God, we and our ancestors
The fathers of our people [*I would suggest fathers and mothers*]
We thank you and we rejoice.
This food, we will eat in your honor.
This drink we will drink in your honor (Lumbala 1998, 33).

Lumbala has pointed out that the structure of the text introducing the communion is similar to words that would have been said by an elder in his offering to the ancestors according to the ancient traditions (Lumbala 1998, 33).

Earlier I mentioned that whenever food accidentally drops on the floor, it is often understood to have gone to the ancestors who are thought to be present at the meal. N. C. Egbulem has developed this idea further in his book, *The Power of Africentric Celebrations* (1996). Egbulem has suggested that one way of including the ancestors in the eucharistic sacrifice would be to “offer a piece of the consecrated bread and some of the consecrated wine to the ancestors as a libation” (, 122). This way the ancestors would share in the eucharistic sacrifice to demonstrate the communion between the ancestors with the living. There is no doubt that many would consider this as an abomination and disrespect for the consecrated elements—but Egbulen has clarified that “libation is not just pouring or throwing away consecrated elements. In this unique ritual, the heavens and the earth come into mutual embrace; the pilgrim church and the triumphant church together celebrate and share the ultimate meal of salvation” (, 122).¹⁷

¹⁷ A further point that has not been developed as part of this study (because of its lack of direct connection with our biblical text) is the use of locally available food and drink as elements for the eucharist. One way of inculturating the eucharistic sacrifice among the Ganda is through the

5. Conclusion

The place of the ancestors in eucharistic sacrifice and celebration may take different forms, but the reality is that it is no longer possible to ignore the ancestral spirituality that visibly dominates the Ganda religious experience. Sharing in the eucharist brings together the living and the departed. The “Faith Chapter” in Heb 11 speaks of departed faithful ancestors. In Heb 12:1 the living are said to be “surrounded by so great cloud of witnesses” i.e. the departed faithful ancestors spoken of in Heb 11. The departed faithful ancestors as it were are still in a way in fellowship with the living providing inspiration and encouragement (to the church militant).¹⁸ The ancestors are made alive in the Ganda naming system and other cultural rites of passage and ceremonies. This work has explored ways in which the Ganda Christian communities can meaningfully engage with the issue of ancestors in the eucharistic celebration. While not taking this as prescriptive or normative for other African societies where ancestor spirituality is prevalent, it nevertheless challenges those societies to the reality of ancestor spirituality and the need to address it.

use of locally available food and drink. In this study I am suggesting that banana bread and banana beer or wine from the staple diet of the Ganda (the plantain) be considered as symbols of the eucharistic sacrifice among the people. This would be a true offering of the Ganda, “fruit of the earth and work of human hands” for the Ganda assembled (together with all faithful ancestors) celebrating the eucharistic sacrifice. For arguments in support of use of locally available food and drink as elements for the eucharist see Uzukwu (1980, 370-85), Okoye (2002, 159-173), Gibson (2002, 445-55), Mbonigaba (1994, 29-30), and Lumbala (1998, 56).

¹⁸ I have spoken of faithful ancestors but there is a particular unresolved ambiguity about ancestors in the Christian tradition. In one sense there is the celebration of “All Saints Day” evidently for the faithful ones but the Christian church also celebrates “All Souls Day” which seem to commemorate all the departed regardless. In Ganda tradition too there are benevolent and malevolent ancestors and while the benevolent ancestors are the ones often invoked one wonders whether the services of a malevolent ancestor could not be sought especially against enemies and in cursing.

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