

## **Comparing the African veneration of Ancestors with Korean Ancestor Worship in Relation to the Attempts to reconcile it with Christianity**

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### **Introduction**

Christianity is a world religion, but it also has its own distinctive features and characteristics in specific places as it is always embodied in individual and particular contexts. In other words, whenever Christian message is spread to a new world, the process of contextualizing has always been happening. Religious practice that centers in venerating ancestors or the living dead is not exceptional, which is playing a significant role in the life of many people around the world, particularly in Africa and Asia. Thus, this paper will deal with how indigenous Christians in Africa and Asia find ways of reconciling traditional concepts concerning ancestors with the Christian message.

### **African Understanding of Ancestors**

There has been general agreement among many scholars about the vital roles of ancestors in the African traditional worldview. For example, Jean-Marc Ela notes, “The cult of the dead is perhaps that aspect of culture to which the African is most attached...the cult of the ancestors is so widespread throughout Africa.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Gift Makwasha asserts that the idea of ancestors “penetrate deeply into the day-to-day socio-political, religious and economic life of the people.”<sup>2</sup> Bénézet Bujo even concludes that ancestor-preoccupation is a “typical, anthropocentric, African mode of thought” because there is no African tribe which does not revere its ancestors.”<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, one anonymous African theologian claims that to take the ancestors from an Africa is “robbing him of his personality.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, there have been different interpretations over the nature of ancestor cult, that is, whether ancestors are venerated or worshipped. Scholars like Pobee and Makwasha have argued that ancestors are objects of worship: Pobee maintained, “perhaps the most potent aspect of Akan religion is the cult of the ancestors. They, like the Supreme Being, are always held in deep reverence or even worshipped.”<sup>5</sup> Makwasha agrees, “Jesus is the ancestor who is not to be

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Marc Ela, *My faith as an African*, 14, cited in Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 112.

<sup>2</sup> Gift Makwasha, “Not Without my Ancestors: A Christological Case Study of the Shona Ancestor cult of Zimbabwe” Th.D. dissertation in Boston University, (2009): 7.

<sup>3</sup> Bénézet Bujo, *African theology in Its Social Context*, trans. by John O'donohue, M. Afr. (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 76-77, 120.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 216.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Stinton, 117.

simply venerated as in the case of the ordinary Shona ancestors—he is to be worshipped.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast, scholars like Alexander Jebadu have claimed that ancestors or the holy living dead are never worshipped as God. Instead, he argues, they are just “venerated, honored, remembered, and loved” due to their proximity with God in heaven.<sup>7</sup>

In order to understand these African understandings of ancestors, it is imperative to know that in the traditional African worldview, ancestors are considered to be continuously living among the living human beings. They are also believed to retain human needs and want to keep participating in the ongoing life of the living community. For these beliefs, Africans traditionally pour a drop on the ground before taking a drink or tasting a plate in order to show their deference to the ancestors who are with them.<sup>8</sup>

Another commonly shared belief is that Africans think that ancestors or the dead in general have some kind of power to influence their living family. This power can be both a blessing and a curse. For example, Africans think that when ancestors are neglected or forgotten by their living relatives they become angry and send misfortunes of punishment.<sup>9</sup> Ancestors are also believed to act as mediators between Mwari, the African God and their living descendants because they are believed to be closer to Mwari than living human beings.<sup>10</sup> Although life comes from God, the ancestors are believed to play an important role in mediating the life force of God to the living.

### **Korean Understanding of Ancestors**

Religious practice that centers in venerating or worshipping ancestors also played a significant role in the life of traditional Koreans.<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact, ancestral veneration was regarded as the most important ritual, so that everyone, regardless of his or her religious preference, was expected to participate in the practice. This was because Korea was under the influence of Confucianism for a long time. Confucianism, in Korea, particularly flourished in the period of the last Kingdom, *Chosun* (1392– 1910).

One of the most important Confucian teachings emphasizes the solidarity of the family and filial piety, *Hyo*. Under the influence of these teachings, Koreans show their respect to the ancestors through *sung-myō* (visitation of ancestral graves) and *che-sa* (ancestral memorial rites). *Che-sa* was extremely important in understanding traditional Korean understanding of ancestral veneration since it was believed that the best way of expressing *Hyo* is through the practice of

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<sup>6</sup> Makwasha, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Jebadu, “Ancestral Veneration and the Possibility of its Incorporation into the Christian Faith,” in *Exchange* 36 (2007): 247.

<sup>8</sup> Francois Kabasele, “Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother” in R. J. Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 119.

<sup>9</sup> Nyamiti, 16.

<sup>10</sup> According to John S. Mbiti, the ancestors “in effect speak a bilingual language of human beings whom they recently ‘left’ through physical death, and of the spirits whom they are now joined, or of God to whom they are now nearer than when they were in their physical life.” John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (Portsmouth, N.H. : Heinemann, 1990), 69.

<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact, not only Koreans but also other Asians such as Chinese and Japanese also have similar concept but this paper will be limited to consideration of traditional Korean ancestral veneration.

*Chesa*. It is noteworthy that ancestral veneration ceremony, *Che-sa*, was practiced in a form of “worship,” not just a sign of veneration in Korea.<sup>12</sup>

Koreans’ understanding of ancestors is very similar with that of Africans in a number of ways. First, many Koreans have thought that the eternal separation from their ancestors is unacceptable, like Africans. Thus, they believe that there is lively interaction between the world of the living and of the dead. Second, in a very similar manner with Africans, Koreans did not distinguish between the realms of the sacred and the secular. Therefore, the purpose of ancestral worship was not concerned about the salvation of the soul but rather just the enrichment of life in this world through the blessing of the ancestors.<sup>13</sup> Third, Koreans have been raised to remember and recite the names of their ancestors from an early age though ancestral veneration.<sup>14</sup>

### Conflicts with Christianity

Both in Africa and Korea, the issue of ancestral veneration was a controversial issue when the early western missionaries came to them. For example, in South Africa, Shona beliefs in tribal ancestors “were regarded as a superstition by the missionaries and the ancestor cult was simply equated with witchcraft.”<sup>15</sup> One quote from a Catholic Father J. O’Neil about ancestor cult shows well the early attitudes of western missionaries toward ancestral veneration in Africa. He wrote: the Ancestor cult is “not from filial piety, but because they are afraid of being harmed by the spirits and wish to propitiate them.”<sup>16</sup> Because of these negative opinions toward ancestral veneration custom, the early missionaries who came to Africa hoped that these “superstitious beliefs” or “the work of the devil” should be cleansed out. According to Makwasha, this negative attitude continued until the late nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

However, many western missionaries eventually realized that it is simply too hard to eradicate the deeply rooted notion of ancestors in the psyche of Africans that “penetrate deeply into the day-to-day socio-political, religious and economic life of the people.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, they

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, Koreans have developed well-established forms of *Chesa*, which usually consists of the following orders: 1. *Yongsin* (opening the doors and setting up a specially prepared *Chesa* meal on the table), 2. *Gangsinsin* (calling the ancestors’ soul by burning incense and dedicated rice wine with two performances of bowing, *Jeol* ), 3. *Chamsinsin* (*Jeol* twice to *Sinwee* or *Jibang*, ancestors’ small paper tablet, on the table), 4. *Chohun* (dedication of rice wine with full bowing twice), 5. *Dokchuk* (chanting the script), 6. *Ahyun* (second dedication of rice wine), 7. *Jonghun* (third dedication of rice wine, but it is not filled up), 8. *Jumchak* (filling up the last offering of rice wine by *Jeju* — usually the first son), 9. *Samsijungju* (putting the spoon into the boiled rice in the bowl), 10. *Hapmun* (closing the door and waiting outside), 11. *Gaemun* (entering again), 12. *Hunda* (putting the boiled water into the rice bowl and then taking three full spoons of rice into the water and tapping chopsticks on the table), 13. *Chulsibokban* (taking the spoon out and putting the lid on the rice bowl), 14. *Sasin* (letting the ancestor’s soul go back), 15. *Chulsang* (taking away all the food of remembrance on the table and burning up the Chant script and *Jibang*), 16. *Umbok* (eating the *Chesa* meal with all the family members in the mood of commemorating parents). Hung Chull Jang, “Religious Cultural Hybridity in *Chudosik* (Ancestor Memorial Service/Ceremony) in Korean Protestantism” in *Journal of Religious History* Vol. 31, No. 4, (December 2007): 405-6.

<sup>13</sup> Lee, 9.

<sup>14</sup> It should be pointed out that this ancestral veneration was mixed with Taoism, Buddhism, and Shamanism.

<sup>15</sup> W. R. Peadar, *Missionary Attitudes to Shona Culture 1890-1923* (Harare: Local Series Pamphlet, 1970, 3), cited by Makwasha, 125.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

found that many African Christians still resort to their ancestors especially in times of crisis.<sup>19</sup> This continuing notion of ancestral veneration led some African theologians to find ways to reconcile this concept with Christian message.

The case of Korea was very similar. Ancestor worship has been a difficult and sometimes a controversial issue for Korean Christians since Roman Catholicism was introduced to Korea in 1784. For example, over 10,000 Korean Catholics were persecuted during the first one hundred years (1784-1884) because they stopped practicing ancestor worship identifying it as idol worship. When the first protestant missionaries arrived in Korea at the end of the nineteenth century, they also considered the ancestral veneration idolatrous behaviors. As a result, they asked newly converted Koreans to give up their ancestral worship as a clear sign to be a Christian, and this decision caused suffering. The suffering that the Protestants had to undergo came from their own family circles who often cast them out. Under this situation, Korean churches, like African churches, also had to find ways to reconcile the ancestral veneration tradition with Christianity. The next section of this paper will deal with these efforts.

### **African Attempts to reconcile Christian Message with Ancestral Veneration**

A number of African theologians have attempted to bring Christian faith and African tradition together by developing Christology based on the concept of ancestors, but among them the idea of Benezet Bujo should be considered foremost because he paved the way for developing new Christology by presenting Jesus as “Proto-Ancestor.” The reason why Bujo gave the title “Proto-Ancestor” to Jesus is to show that Jesus is the authentic ideal of the God-fearing African ancestor, who not only met the ideal qualifications but also “infinitely transcended that ideal and brought it to new completion.”<sup>20</sup>

Several scholars also have turned to ancestral Christology believing that ancestral Christology can capture the thought of Africans. For example, Kwame Bediako uses the African primal world-view of ancestors with its place and significance in discussing encounter of the Christian faith with primal religious traditions.<sup>21</sup> Pobee also presents Jesus as “the Great and Greatest Ancestor”- in Akan language Nana, emphasizing that “even if Jesus is Nana like the other illustrious ancestors,... he is superior to the other ancestors by virtue of being closes to God and as God.”<sup>22</sup> Makwasha develops a more detailed ancestral Christology by presenting “tripartite Christology” founded on the Shona “tripartite ancestrology”: “Jesus the Family Ancestor” (Jesu Muzimu Wepamusha); “Jesus the Tribal Ancestor” (Jesu Mudzimu Wedzinza); and “Jesus the National Ancestor” (Jesu Mudzimu Wenykika). While presenting this Christology, he also emphasizes that Jesus is not just coexistent with the other Shona ancestors but superior to them as the greatest ancestor.<sup>23</sup> All these efforts<sup>24</sup> aim at contextualizing Christian message without ignoring the traditional ancestor cult of Africa.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>20</sup> Bujo, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Bediako, 210.

<sup>22</sup> John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1979), 84.

<sup>23</sup> Makwasha, 11.

<sup>24</sup> However, there have been objections as well to the ideas of presenting Jesus as ancestors. The most serious objection is related to the fact that the qualifications of ancestors are contrasted with Jesus. For example, the facts that Jesus was young, never married, never left any descendants, and, in a sense, his physical death cannot be

### **Korean Attempts to reconcile Christian Message with Ancestral Worship**

Like Africans, Korean Christians also have developed their way of contextualizing Christian message while keeping the long-rooted tradition of ancestor worship. Unlike Africans though, Korean theologians did not develop any Christology based on the concepts. Instead, Koreans have developed new ancestral worship form, called *Chudosik*, based on Christianity. This new form, *Chudosik*, helps many Koreans continue to remember and venerate their ancestors but turn their object of worship from ancestors to God. For this reason, the specific processes and orders of *Chudosik* differ from traditional Confucian *Chesa* in a number of respects. As I mentioned above, *Chesa* is the process of calling an ancestor's soul, treating him or her, and subsequently allowing him or her to return, but the procedure of *Chudosik* does not call the ancestor's soul but just pray for them. Here, I exhibit one example of the whole process of *Chudosik*, based on Christian service<sup>25</sup>: 1) Introduction (proclamation of opening worship), 2) Hymn, 3) Prayer, 4) Apostle's Creed, 5) Bible reading, 6) Sermon or Speech for Consolation, 7) Prayer, 8) Memorizing parents (by words being said by their relatives or their children), 9) Recalling memories of ancestor (with recorded tapes, pictures, memorabilia and other materials), 10) Hymn, 11) Benediction.

When we compare this new form of worship, *Chudosik*, with the traditional, *Chesa*, we can see that Koreans are reinterpreting the Confucian value, *Hyo*, without worshipping the dead ancestors. Accepting this new form of ancestral veneration, many Korean Christians could find a way of escaping conflicts with their families.

However, like the case of African Christians, not every Christian accepts this new form. In fact, conflict whether to keep the traditional ancestral worship style or to adopt new Christian form of worship are ongoing issues among Christians. We can find some differences between Catholics and Protestants as well. Generally speaking, Protestants are more accepting of the new form of *Chudosik*, while Catholics are inclined to continue the traditional ancestral worship, *Che-sa*. This has to do with the Rome's changed perspective on ancestor worship.<sup>26</sup> This is very interesting considering the historical fact that many Catholics were persecuted due to their rejection of *Che-sa*.

### **Conclusion**

Until now, this paper has shown how the African Christians and Korean Christians are trying to find ways of reconciling traditional ancestral veneration with Christianity. To reiterate, without ignoring the ancestor cult, some African theologians initiated and developed new Christology by presenting Jesus as Proto, or Great Ancestor. In Korea, the new worship form of *Chudosik* has been developed as an alternative to the traditional *Che-sa*. Although there are some limitations, I believe that their efforts of contextualization without merely dismissing the

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considered a "good death" prevent some Africans from accepting Jesus as their ancestor. One Kenyan lay man, Ole Ronkei, comments his objection to the idea in this regard: "Christ can't be an ancestor! No! How can he be? He was a young kid!...He didn't have children! Where are the offspring?" Cited in Stinton, 132-3.

<sup>25</sup> Korean Evangelical Holiness Church, *The Book of Worship* (Seoul: KEHC Publishing, 1996): 252-5.

<sup>26</sup> On December 18<sup>th</sup> of 1939, the pope Pius XII issued an encyclical on the Chinese custom of ancestor worship, claiming that Confucian ancestor worship should be regarded merely as a civil ritual to express filial affection to ancestors. Lee, 25.

ingenious traditions should be praised since the call for acculturating Christian message is important call to every Christian.