

# Nchumuru Ancestral Veneration and Christian Devotion

Bernard Asewie

GILLBT, Translation Consultant

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## ABSTRACT

After reading a number of books regarding African philosophy, cultures and religious traditions, I have come to realise that religious piety that centres on remembering, loving, honouring or venerating the dead or ancestors still to this modern day plays a significant role in the life of the majority Africans, including those who have embraced the Christian faith. Ancestral veneration is a religious aspect that is very central in African traditional religions and this centrality has led some African theologians like Enyi Ben Udoh, Kwame Bediako, Charles Nyamiti and Takatso Mofokeng to propose ancestral frame as a point of departure to develop African Christology, which leads to the possibility of calling Jesus Christ as Great Ancestor or Proto-Ancestor. Unfortunately, in the past (before the Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965) the Church and other secular societies mistakenly understood ancestral venerations as idolatrous and superstitious and called that ancestral worship. We understand that ancestral veneration is only one aspect of a complex belief's system of African traditional religions. With this in mind, this brief study will limit itself to exploring only the main role of ancestors in Nchumuru religious context. The study will end with the argument that Nchumuru ancestral veneration has a devotional character like devotions to the saints in Christianity, and therefore should be incorporated into Christian Devotion.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In researching into Nchumuru ancestral veneration and Christian devotion, I used the qualitative and mixed-methods approaches situated within theological anthropology and ethnography. This topic explores the intersection of Nchumuru traditional cultural rituals and Christian faith, which requires understanding people's lived experiences, beliefs, and meanings. Here is a breakdown of the specific research methods and tools I used which are best suited for the study. These are primary research methods, rooted in ethnography. Here I immersed myself in the Nchumuru community, being an Nchumuru myself. I observed at close range how daily life bridges traditional and Christian practices.

I also used the participant observation method, observing Nchumuru ancestral rituals, festivals, and family libations. Attending local Christian church services, prayer meetings, and vigils. Observing dual participation (people engaging in both systems). I made use of the semi-structured Interviews: Formal but flexible conversations guided by an interview schedule. The targets were Nchumuru traditional priests, family heads, and elders, local Christian clergy, catechists, and lay church members. I also reflected on theological works on ancestral veneration and inculturation analysis: Evaluating the data through African Christian theology frameworks. Examining how Christian doctrines adapt to or clash with Nchumuru worldviews. Analyzing existing literature on Nchumuru history (Brukum, NJK 1979), social structure (Lumsden, Paul 1974 and Agorsah EK 1986), and cosmology (Asewie, B. 2013). I secured verbal or written permission from community leaders and participants, especially the late chief of my community (Kumdi). I was also very cautious in my approach to the subject of ancestral veneration with academic neutrality, avoiding religious bias or judgmental language.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE NCHUMURU

The Nchumuru are one of several people groups found in Ghana in West Africa. Linguistically, the Nchumuru originated in the Guan cradle, which is located in the Densu Valley. They belong to the Kwa family of the

Guan (North) sub-group of the Volta Camoe of the Niger-Congo group of languages. They speak a language called Chumburung (*Kyonborong*). The Nchumuru people are located on either side of the Volta Lake in east-central Ghana, primarily concentrated in the Oti, Northern, and Bono East regions. Their geographic territory spans an area of approximately 2,200 to 2,969 square kilometres, depending on whether you measure the historical tribal homelands or the official government district borders.

The Nchumuru are a Guan ethnic group whose present-day settlements are broken up into isolated pockets by the waters of Lake Volta. Their primary areas of dominance include Oti Region: They are the dominant group in the Krachi Nchumuru District (with its administrative capital at Chinderi), as well as parts of Krachi West and Krachi East District. In the Northern Region, they reside across the regional border in the Kpandai District. In the Bono East Region, they occupy sections of the Yeji, Pru, and Atebubu districts along the lake's shores.

The tribal area, according to ethnographic profiles maintained by the Joshua Project, the traditional Nchumuru homeland consists of five isolated districts split by the lake, covering a total surface area of roughly 2,200 square kilometres (Barker 1986:265). The Government District, if measuring the modern political boundary of the Krachi Nchumuru District Assembly, the administrative area covers a total land area of 2,969 square kilometres, with open water making up about 15% of that space.

Today they are largely located mainly on their lands in neighbouring parts of three of Ghana's Regions: i.e. Krachi Nchumuru and Krachi East Districts in the Oti Region, in Kpandai District of the Northern Region, and in the Pru and Sene Districts, which comprises of Yeji-Prang-Kwame Danso-Bassa triangle of the Bono East Region; in addition, small but organized clusters of migrant Nchumuru work in such urban centres like Kumasi, Accra and Tamale.

### Nchumuru Ancestral Beliefs

The Nchumuru believe in the hereafter. This belief is inferred from the treatment of the corpse, giving food and other gifts to the deceased. It is believed that the journey to the next world is a long, tortuous one and so one needs money, food and water for it. They believe that the hereafter is but a continuation of life more or less as it is in its human form, the location of which new life is with *Wuribware* (God) in the heavens. According to Nana Okyere (2005), the belief in the continued existence and influence of departed fathers and mothers in families, clans and the sections of the language is very strong among the Nchumuru of Ghana. Mbiti accedes to this fact when he said: "So long as the living-dead is remembered, he or she is in a state of personal immortality. This personal immortality is externalised in the physical continuation of the individual through procreation, so that the children bear the traits of their parents or progenitors" (1969:25). The ancestors who the Nchumuru call *akyeɲaŋpo* (meaning the dead or ghosts), are the souls of the departed heroes and heroines of the Nchumuru. They become *akyeɲaŋpo* immediately after burial. Belief in the ancestors among the Nchumuru is based on the general notion that life continues after death, and that communication is possible between the living and the dead (Okisipo Apowii, 2012). The Nchumuru believe that the ancestors have powers to influence the affairs of the living for better or for worse. Therefore one needs to propitiate them, for which the Chumburung say you *lɔŋŋɔ* or repair them.

Among the Nchumuru every person who dies becomes an ancestor, but the deceased has to be an adult for people to propitiate him or her. All the dead become ancestors, and people propitiate them. If one dies on the battlefield, in defence of the community, this enhances one's reputation.

For many Nchumuru, especially the older people who will soon join the ancestors, the invisible is almost as real as the visible, and they cherish memories of the dead. People say they have seen or communicated with the departed. The sick and dying have visions of those who have gone before them and these 'phantasms of the dying' are very common. Because of these beliefs associated with the ancestors, the Nchumuru take great care in the burial and mourning ceremonies for the dead. Often, great expense is incurred and debts are accumulated by this expression of feeling. Sickness and misfortune are often believed to be due to some neglect in fulfilling the last rites of a deceased family member. Family life therefore is strengthened by emphasis on performing duties for the dead. Old men and women and parents are especially honoured. (Nana Ndese 1, 2005).

## Importance of ancestral veneration in Nchumuru Traditional Religion

According to Diane B. Stinton, the vital role of ancestors in traditional African thoughts is beyond dispute, and it is apparent in numerous literatures that deal with African Religions and African Christianity (2004:112). Dr Peter Sarpong the former Catholic Archbishop of Kumasi and an authority on Akan culture, in talking about the relative position of the ancestors summed up his thoughts in this: “While God’s power surpasses all others, the ancestors would appear to tilt the scale in their favour if their power could be weighed against that of the lesser gods. After all are the deities not often referred to as “the innumerable gods of our ancestors, the spokesmen of the human spirits?” (1974:48-51).

The Nchumuru see the communion with the dead as central to the worldview of African peoples as evident in funeral rites, initiation rites, hunting ceremonies, and other rituals. Ancestral veneration is one of the fundamental pillars of religion for many ethnic groups in Africa, including the Nchumuru. Hence, anyone, who would propose an Ecclesiology, a Christology or a Sacramental Theology from the point of view of African ancestral veneration, would have to pay particular attention to those living dead, whose commemoration is regarded by their descendants as dispensable and beneficial or even redemptive for their earthly existence. Jean Marc Ela also gives a similar testimony. He says that despite the fact that ancestral veneration takes different forms in different African societies, the cult of the dead is perhaps that of the culture to which the African is most attached, it is a heritage clung to above all else ( Stinton 2004:112).

Their perceived contribution to the welfare of the community, places our ancestors in the category of holy people as seen in other religions. The role of the ancestors in the life of an Nchumuru family and the wider community cannot be underestimated. They are the guardians of the tribal traditions and history, hence the secrecy, professed ignorance, or obvious falsification of the tradition which sometimes confront inquirers into local history. People wonder if the ancestors will not be angered if traditional affairs are revealed. The ancestors are believed to be the custodians of the laws and customs of the people. Offences that go against these are ultimately offences against the ancestors. In this regard, the ancestors act as an invisible police force for Nchumuru families and clans. They are the unseen presidents at family meetings. They are the spiritual superintendents of earthly families of which they are still members although they are no longer alive (Nana Ndese 1, 2005). John Pobee formerly of the University of Ghana also underlined the importance of the ancestors when he said:

“Whereas the gods may be treated with contempt if they fail to deliver the goods expected of them, the ancestors, like the Supreme Being, are always held in reverence or even worshipped”(1979:48).

On another note Kwame Bediako (1990:40) having identified the importance of the ancestors in Ghanaian culture said: “Ancestors are considered worthy of honour for having lived among us and for having brought benefits to us”.

They send sickness or misfortune to punish those who infringe these laws and customs. The land of the Nchumuru belongs to the ancestors, because they owned it and worked on it. Each household head, each clan head and each village chief has his own stool to sit on, and the chief's stool represents his chieftaincy. When it is said that the land belongs to the stool, or that the land belongs to the chief, what is really meant is that the land is looked after by the ancestors. The ancestors are also a link between the living and the spiritual world. Through them the spiritual world becomes real to the people. The ancestors are part of a chain of intermediaries between people and God, people direct their requests to the ancestors through the gods.

Clans venerate their family ancestors through the performance of other rites. The clan head is the custodian of a clan ancestral cult called *Akyeɲanpo kaaba* (meaning the dead/ghost's bowl). He offers libation prayers and sacrifices on certain good days to the ancestors at this bowl set in his courtyard, for the clan's prosperity and well-being. People cannot drink or eat the beer or meat until the prayers are said. At a village level, ancestral spirits are invoked during the arbitration of cases at the chief's palace, and also at marriage ceremonies, building of new houses, installing of market centres and so on, through libation pouring (Nana Awaase 2005).

## The Main Role Ancestors play in Nchumuru Traditional Religion

If ancestral veneration is so central in Nchumuru religious traditions, what, then, is the roles of the ancestors in Nchumuru religious (African) thoughts? Charles Nyamiti from Tanzania gives answers to this question. He outlines five common elements: 1) Natural relationship between the ancestor and his or her earthly relatives, usually based on parenthood but sometime on brotherhood or membership in a secret society. 2) Supernatural or secret status acquired through death and understood in terms of super-human powers and nearness to God. Ancestors are presented as ambivalent in character, for they can be benevolent to their earthly kin but can also intervene in human affairs to bring harms, particularly punishment for relatives who have neglected them or committed some offence within the community. 3) Mediation between God and humanity because of their supernatural status and proximity to God. 4) Title to regular sacred communion with earthly relatives with whom the ancestors long to maintain contact. 5) Exemplarity, as models of good behaviour (Stinton 112-113). All these roles agree perfectly with what pertains in the Nchumuru traditional beliefs system.

Because they are believed to have such roles, African ancestors and for that matter Nchumuru, ancestors are remembered, honoured and venerated by their living kin. They are invoked for their intercessory helps by the living kin and for the living kin.

## The Refutation of Two Main Prejudices

At least until the Second Vatican Council and to some extent till today, African ancestral veneration was gravely misunderstood as a sort of idolatry and superstition. Briefly, I will demonstrate that these prejudices are unfounded. Nchumuru religious piety that centres on honouring the ancestors or the dead in general, on the contrary, is by its nature non-idolatrous and non-superstitious.

## Nchumuru Ancestral Veneration and Idolatry

It is not a secret that some people view ancestral veneration as being idolatrous. To mention only one example, the wide use of the phrase 'Ancestor Worship' in the works of many scholars especially anthropologists (Hardacre 1987:263-268). Protestants who negate the special role of the superhuman beings and semi-gods and hold a belief in God without mediator and in salvation without mediation (David 1985), indicate that ancestral veneration in their understanding is idolatrous. Even in the Catholic Church, commonly believed to have more positive attitudes toward ancestral veneration, not all modern Catholic scholars and theologians are free from the use of the inappropriate phrase, 'Ancestor Worship' (Fr. Malek 1999:17-22). They also, either consciously or unconsciously by calling this religious piety a worship, still treat ancestral veneration as an idolatry. The title of their works is in contrast with the title of the works of some African scholars and theologians (Bokie 1993) who directly experience religious piety of ancestral veneration.

Idolatry, in a strict sense, is the worship of the creature instead of the Creator, and the creature worshipped is made by man who is himself a creature. Therefore, it is creature-worshipping creature. Another possibility is idolatry defined as the worship of an idol, image, or portrait that is regarded as a substitute for the divine (Ries 1987:72-73). Under this understanding of idolatry, African and more specifically Nchumuru, ancestral veneration is not idolatrous because of the following three major reasons.

- 1) Nchumuru ancestral veneration does not consist of the worshipping of lifeless images or idols of emptiness. Instead, it primarily consists of venerating, honouring and loving human life, the spirits of the dead that still survives after death and continue to live and engage an enduring communion with their living relatives. This belief is also very fundamental in the Christian faith (*cf.* the dogma of communion of Saints).
- 2) Nchumuru ancestral veneration is not of worshipping demons hiding in images, statues, paintings or sculptures, as often claimed by the early fathers of the Church when talking about the danger of idolatry. Instead, it is of veneration of the living spirits of the dead. They are not demons or evil spirits and are distinctly different from demons and evil spirits. The carved images of ancestors (Ray 1987:68) found in some traditional societies of Africa are not intended to be representational or abstract but conceptual and

evocative. These ancestral carved images convey the characteristics of the ancestors and help to make the spiritual reality of the ancestors present among the living. Thus, the carved ancestral icon enables the world of the living community and the world of the ancestors to come together for the benefit of human life.

- 3) Nchumuru ancestral veneration is not of the worshipping of creatures in place of God, since the living souls of the dead are never viewed, approached or treated as God. Instead they are viewed as special human beings, having achieved a higher status, a status of being closer to God, and from this status of advantage, accordingly, they are believed to be able to play an intermediary role between God and the living, a belief which is also very central in the Judeo-Christian faith, especially in the Catholic Church and Orthodox Church (*cf.* intermediary role of Angels and Saints). In addition, Nchumuru ancestral veneration is never a religion in itself. It is only one aspect of a complex religious system that usually has God as an Absolute Being. Even if in the religious practices of Nchumuru traditional societies, ancestors are addressed more often than God, normally the living will turn to the Supreme Being as the last resort when their recourse to the ancestors fails to procure the desired effects (Nyamiti 1993:16). Turning to God as the last resort is an indication that ancestors or the living dead are not believed to be 'absolute beings' and, suffice it to say, the living do not have an absolute dependence on them.

### Ancestral Veneration and Superstition

Another common prejudice, rooted in the hearts of some Christian Protestants or even of Catholics who do not have a sufficient understanding concerning ancestral veneration, is a tendency to view ancestral veneration as superstitious. Whether or not those claims are true, superstition needs to be examined to find out if ancestral veneration is included under its umbrella.

In public parlance, superstition is generally understood as something irrational and illogical to the human mind. In accordance with this, Oxford's dictionary defines superstition as beliefs of certain events that cannot be explained by reason or science or beliefs that can bring good or bad luck (Crowther 1995:1199). Some Examples of superstition are: "It's bad luck to see a dead guinea fowl on a farm. It is bad luck to have a rat cross your path in the afternoon." In religious context, superstition is seemingly a judgmental term traditionally used by dominant religions to categorize and downgrade the less sophisticated or disapproved religious attitudes and behaviour. In religious parlance the use of the term superstition is pejorative and not analytical since it is defined in opposition to a given culture's concept of true religion.

Under this understanding of superstition, it is unwise to view Nchumuru and by extension African ancestral veneration as all but superstitious. Some elements of Nchumuru ancestral veneration, such as excessive fear of the living dead, the belief that the dead cannot get rest when they die instant or what others called unplanned deaths, can be regarded as superstitious and it should be part of the pastoral work of the Church to trim and polish, if the Church decides to incorporate it into the frame of the Judeo-Christian faith and elevates it as African Christian Ancestral Veneration. However, to brand the whole African veneration of the dead as superstitious, illogical and meaningless would be inappropriate. The religious piety of ancestral practices is based on universal belief of men in the continuation of life after death, in the existence of God Almighty as the only source of life both for the living and for the dead, and in the continuous communion between the living community in the world and the living dead in great beyond, beliefs which are very fundamental also to Christianity.

### Nchumuru Ancestral Veneration is Devotional in Character

I have demonstrated that Nchumuru ancestral veneration is a religious piety that centres in honouring, loving and remembering the dead, while at the same time asking for their mediatory help. It is still widely and popularly practiced in modern African ethnic groups. In early Christianity, the same practice of religious piety was slowly developed and transformed into a new form that is called devotions to the angels and saints. In addition, Nchumuru ancestral veneration is never a religion in itself but an aspect of a complex religious system. That is why even those, who have espoused one of the great world religions, such as Christianity or Islam, to mention only two, do not find a contradiction between venerating their ancestors and worshipping the God of the established great religion.

Its reason lies here: ancestors are not worshipped but honoured, venerated and loved because of their being near to God in the afterlife, exactly like the religious piety of the Catholic faith tradition that is called devotion to the angels and saints. Like angels and saints, all those who have died and are believed to have been with God, including the so-called ancestors, are God's friends in heaven. They can play a role as mediators between God and the living. They can become God's messengers, and protectors as well as the guardians of the living community. Nchumuru ancestral veneration does not contradict with the Christian faith but runs parallel with it. The Christian Church, then, is called upon to study this African religious piety in depth, put it in a right perspective and incorporate it into Christian devotion.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A rigorous comparison between Nchumuru ancestors and Christian saints reveals a shared human desire for heavenly intercession, but they differ fundamentally in their theological basis, sacrificial practices, and institutional oversight. Here is how the two traditions compare across core theological concepts:

### Latria vs. Dulia (Worship vs. Veneration)

**Christian Saints:** Receive *dulia* (veneration) and *hyperdulia* (for Mary). *Latria* (sacrificial worship) belongs strictly to the Triune God.

**Nchumuru Ancestors:** Receive deep reverence that blurs Western definitions of *dulia* and *latria*. While the Supreme Being (*Wuribware*) is ultimate, ancestors receive direct animal sacrifices and libations, actions reserved for God alone in Christianity.

### Communion of Saints vs. Ancestral Community

**Christian Saints: Part of the *Communio Sanctorum*.** This mystical body unites the living, the souls in Purgatory, and the saints in Heaven through Christ.

**Nchumuru Ancestors:** Members of the living-dead community. They remain active family elders who survive death, keeping a close watch over their earthly kinship group.

### Christ's Mediation vs. Ancestral Mediation

**Christian Saints:** Act as subordinate intercessors. Their prayers have power only through the unique, ultimate mediation of Jesus Christ.

**Nchumuru Ancestors:** Act as primary intermediaries between *Wuribware* (God), lesser deities (*ikisi*), and humans. They possess inherent spiritual authority derived from their status as moral elders.

### Sacrifice and Offering

**Christian Saints:** No sacrifices are offered to saints. In the Catholic Church for instant, the mass commemorates Christ's single, unrepeatable sacrifice on Calvary.

**Nchumuru Ancestors:** Fed and appeased through regular physical sacrifices. Pouring libations, offering food, and animal slaughter are mandatory to maintain cosmic and social balance.

### Invocation (Prayer)

**Christian Saints:** Invoked to pray *with* and *for* the believer. Christians ask saints to petition God on their behalf.

**Nchumuru Ancestors:** Invoked directly for immediate earthly blessings. Believers pray to them for fertility, good harvests, protection, and vengeance against enemies.

## Ecclesial Discernment vs. Community Recognition

**Christian Saints:** Confirmed through a strict, centralized legal process (canonization). This requires historical scrutiny, theological evaluation, and verified miracles.

**Nchumuru Ancestors:** Recognised through local community consensus. Status requires reaching old age, marrying, having children, dying a natural death, and living an exemplary moral life.

### Key Similarities and Differences

| Feature            | Christian Saints                   | Nchumuru Ancestors                     |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Living Connection  | Intercede for the living.          | Actively influence daily family life.  |
| Moral Standard     | Lived lives of heroic virtue.      | Upheld tribal laws and traditions.     |
| Ultimate Source    | Power comes from God's grace.      | Power comes from status and age.       |
| Punitive Power     | Do not punish or curse the living. | Punish descendants for moral failures. |
| Scope of Influence | Universal; patrons for all humans. | Particular; limited to their lineage.  |

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the complex relationship between Nchumuru ancestral veneration and Christian devotion, demonstrating that these two religious systems are not mutually exclusive. Instead, Nchumuru Christians can actively engage in a process of religious hybridization. By maintaining a deep respect for their ancestors while fully embracing Christian doctrines, they redefine what it means to be both authentically Nchumuru and faithfully Christian. Ultimately, this integration proves that cultural heritage and modern Christian faith can coexist, enriching the spiritual lives of the Nchumuru people without demanding the erasure of their historical identity.

I believe that ancestral veneration is one of the Nchumuru (African) noble religious values that are in need of further deep study. It does not contradict the Christian faith but runs parallel with it. African (Nchumuru) ancestors who are Christians can also qualify as saints just as Christian saints. If this effort is properly done, African (Nchumuru) ancestral veneration will enhance the growth of the Church in Africa and at the same time make it truly African.

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