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Published in:
Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies

DOI:
[10.1177/02653788241271796](https://doi.org/10.1177/02653788241271796)

Published: 01/01/2024

Document Version
Final published version

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Please cite the original version:
Kaunda, C., & Vähäkangas, M. (2024). The Holy Spirit as 'the Gift' in Charles Nyamiti's Trinitarian Theology: A Pentecostal-Lutheran Dialogical Perspective. *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02653788241271796>

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The Holy Spirit as “the Gift” in Charles Nyamiti’s Trinitarian Theology: A Pentecostal-Lutheran Dialogical Perspective

Transformation

1–15

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DOI: 10.1177/02653788241271796

journals.sagepub.com/home/trn**Chammah J. Kaunda** 

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Abstract

This article starts from the theology of the Tanzanian-born Charles Nyamiti (1931–2020), as one of the most creative in his generation of African theologians. Nyamiti proposed that ancestral veneration is a foundational human relationship which reflects divine realities. Thus, he proposed an understanding of the Trinity where the Father is the Ancestor, the Son is the Descendant, and the Holy Spirit is the mutual Oblation connecting the two. Because an ancestor does not exist as an ancestor without sacred ritual communication, the Holy Spirit becomes thus absolutely necessary for the Godhead. We maintain that Nyamiti’s ancestral approach describes an African logic of gift-giving. Translating his theological contribution into gift-language preserves the theological insights while solving some of the logical problems with the ancestral imaginary, such as how the Father who never died is supposed to be the Ancestor. Through gift-language, Nyamiti’s theological insights, which are based on African relational ontologies, become more readily applicable in World Christianity and have potential to transform ecumenism into a vibrant and inclusive embodied pneumatic action for abundant life. In other words, Nyamiti’s theological heritage invites theologians to envision Christian faith beyond the confines of Hellenistic-based philosophy.

Keywords

African theology, african philosophy, the holy spirit as “the gift”, charles nyamiti, ecumenism of the holiness, pentecostal-Lutheran dialogical perspective

Introduction

Fr. Prof. Charles Nyamiti (1931–2020), despite not being among the most visible African Christian academic theologians, is arguably one of the most creative and significant in his generation from the systematic theological perspective. His approach was coloured by a bold acknowledgement of the

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value of African cultural heritage, to the extent of proposing some of his theological insights based on it as potential future teachings of the global Roman Catholic Church. In this article, we want to carry on part of his intellectual path which is least explored, and to utilize the cultural-theological resources he provides for further elaboration. Our scholarly positions, situated in our distinctive cultures and informed by our denominational backgrounds, which differ from Nyamiti's, afford us a distinct vantage point.

Chammah J. Kaunda comes to this dialogue on Nyamiti's pneumatology as an African first and Pentecostal second. He finds himself immersed in both African spirituality (specifically that of the Bemba people of Zambia) and Pentecostal Christianity, which resists conventional norms in the Christian faith. This synthesis of frameworks enables Kaunda to adopt both internal and external perspectives. The potency of African spirituality lies in its openness to alternative modes of thought, existence, and evolution. It embodies a dynamic and adaptable spirituality that harmoniously incorporates diverse ways of life. Conversely, Pentecostalism exhibits a selective ecumenical stance. It selectively rejects some and integrates other elements from various cultural, religious, and philosophical spheres, while simultaneously stigmatizing dissenting viewpoints. Thus, positioned at the intersection of these systems of thought and spiritual paradigms, Kaunda not only possesses the ability to negotiate effectively but also to transcend their confines. The Pentecostal concept of "the Freedom of the Spirit" (Galatians 3:23–39, also "the Spirit is like the wind that blows wherever it wants to," John 3:8 NIV, used throughout) signifies that a mind attuned to the Spirit's influence operates under the dominion of the Holy Spirit. This facilitates not only fluid or windy cognitive functioning but also the potential to engage with alternative perspectives on Christian doctrines and African heritage. To embrace Pentecostalism is to reject the notion that established interpretations of Christian doctrines and African religio-cultural heritages are immutable. Consequently, Kaunda does not perceive himself as beholden to normative dogmas or traditional African practices. Instead, he consistently explores fresh avenues for comprehending and construing both Christian doctrines and African religio-cultural heritages within the ever-shifting global context, alongside diverse belief systems, secular ideologies, and facets of the non-human realm.

Mika Vähäkangas comes from Finland and grew up in a field of tensions between Enlightenment rationalism prevalent in the society and the conservative revivalist Christian views of his family background. The religiosity of the indigenous people in the very north of Finland blended in this revivalist Christian spirituality, in a postcolonial society divided along ethnic lines between the colonized Sami and the colonizers, including the Finns (Vähäkangas 2012a, 2012b). He spent much of his early career in Tanzania and wrote his Th.D. thesis on Charles Nyamiti's fundamental theology (Vähäkangas 1999, 1997, 2000). The years in Tanzania and African studies raised his awareness of the colonial structures in his home society.

Therefore, in this article, we located our dialogue on Nyamiti at the intersection of African Pentecostalism and European Lutheranism. We have theorized the idea of gift by revealing a pivotal starting point and its relevance to examining ongoing discourse on Nyamiti's gift-pneumatology. This is in the attempt at disconnecting Nyamiti's trinitarian theology from its European Thomistic roots and developing further his theorizing on and application of African traditions in Christian theology. Our basic question is the title of Robert E. Hood's (1990) book: *Must God Remain Greek?* Is Christian doctrinal theology destined to remain Hellenic-based? To be a true Christian, does one need to subscribe at least some of the Hellenic philosophical and cultural tradition even if it would be culturally alienating?

While Nyamiti used ancestral veneration, or rather ancestral bonds between ancestors and descendants, as his key to African traditions, we have chosen to approach the question through the concept of gift. We believe that it contains some of the most crucial elements of ancestral bonds

and opens up some new theological vistas. We begin our work by creating a model of viewing gift based on African cultures. Thereafter, we introduce our reading of Charles Nyamiti's trinitarian theology and finally propose a synthesis between our concept of gift and Nyamiti's theology. We conclude by demonstrating Nyamiti's core idea connected to the theology of the Holy Spirit – the holiness of “the other” in World Christianity and it's the potential to transform ecumenism into a vibrant and inclusive embodied pneumatic action of the Trinity for abundant life.

The Gift of Bondedness

As in several other African relational philosophies, the Bemba people of Zambia emphasize the interconnectedness of individuals within their community. In this worldview, the act of giving a gift (*ukupela*) is not merely a transactional exchange; it represents a deeply ingrained connection where there is no distinction between the giver and the receiver. In Bemba linguistics, the verb *ukupela* (the noun *ubupe*) conveys nuances as it refers to a venerable extension of the self and the invitation of the other into a liminal space to co-create each other through the locus of *icabupe* (what is given). This *icabupe* creates a dynamic liminal space for co-subjectivity, intense co-participation in life, bondedness, and mutual becoming and sharing each other's life and existence. Hence, in this system of thought, gifts are regarded with utmost seriousness due to their fundamental significance as sites representing life and death. The gravity attached to gifts goes beyond mere material exchange; they symbolize profound aspects of existence and carry implications for the giver and the receiver that extend into the very core of life and mortality. This philosophy is also inhospitable to promotion of any clear distinction between the gift itself and the giver. Instead, the act of giving is seen as an extension of one's self, a reflection of both parties' values, mutual participation in the oneness of life and a means of reinforcing eco-relational “bondedness” (Sindima 1989, 1991). Aylward Shorter (1985: 65) observes:

A gift signifies the giver. It is a part of the giver as it were, placed in the hands of the receiver. The receiver, conversely, is obligated by the gift, placed in the giver as debt. Gifts have the peculiar power of creating what they signify. Refusal of a gift is the refusal of a relationship, perhaps a declaration of war. The symbolism of gift is especially powerful when it concerns food and drink, the ritual feast, by which giver and receiver nourish their life-processes by the same means.

Similarly, John Mbiti (1969; see also Hiebert et al. 1999) points out that gift-giving is often associated with obligations in which the giver, in the act of giving, forges a spiritual bond with the receiver. In the context of eco-relational bondedness, both the giver and receiver of the gift mutually entangle themselves in the web of the fullness of life in which they share in each other's profound sense of and meaning in life (Kaunda 2016).

The gift, through its mediating spiritual power of life, imparts orientation and animates human relationships, making existence an adventure worth living (Boulaga 1984). In this context, the gift embodies not just a material offering but the fullness of the being of the giver's identity, intentions, and the reciprocal expectations of communal harmony. The person embodies the entirety of life, encompassing the totality of being in a state of constant becoming, which includes everything related to and belonging to the person (Mulago 1969: 138–137). God, life, creation and everything are grounded in the idea of gift (Tylor 1913 orig. 1873; Gordon 2006; Turner 1969, 1974). Life is a gift. Humans are gifts to one another. Creation is a gift, and so on. The gift is not a neutral concept because it carries the implications of mutual vulnerability (giving and surrendering the totality of the self). In African systems of thought, the idea of gift represents the life force of the giver and implies reciprocity or the exchange of life energies. This means that basically, the giver of the

gift gives themselves to the recipient because the vital force as the core of being and becoming, it is life itself (Tempels 1948). When people offer gifts, they create a liminal space of mutual participation in life. The refusal of a gift is often perceived as a sign of rejecting the relationship. The gift has been utilized as a force for restoring relationships and reconciliation.

In the Bemba ontology¹ of eco-relational bondedness of vital forces in vital participation, the gift is perceived as a vital force in its own right.² The idea of the gift articulated with the five categorical prefixes associated with the idea of Bantu (*Ba-ntu*) metaphysics: *ubu-Ntu* (functional pro-existential care capacity inherent in all things)³; *Umu-Ntu* (plural: *aba-ntu*) refers to human beings, both living and deceased, as well as those yet-to-be-born; *ici-Ntu* (plural: *ifi-ntu*) encompasses all physical and spiritual non-human entities, such as natural spirits, divinities, extraterrestrial beings, animals, mountains, trees, water, earth, artificial beings, and non-beings; *apa-Ntu* (plural: *uku-Ntu*) represents space, time, and locations; and *aka-Ntu*, which encompasses fantasy or fiction and modalities like creativity, technology, wisdom, imagination, gift, beauty, laughter, words, and rhythm. These categorical prefixes do not carry their independent meanings but are permanently defined and determined by the determinative root, *Ntu*. The inherent *Ntu* is the life principle that makes them vital forces and gives them meaning and animated existence (Kaunda 2023). While this categorization comes from Bemba language, it needs to be noted that all Bantu languages spoken in Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa have a similar logic of categorizing the world seen and unseen. The number and type of categories varies but the underlying logic is the same. One may maintain that while Aristotle deduced many of his categories in his *Metaphysics* from his mother tongue, Greek, likewise Bantu languages have functioned as a similar source of philosophical inspiration for John Mbiti, Alexis Kagame, and subsequent African thinkers (Kagame 1955; Kaunda 2023; Masolo 1995; Mulago 1969; Nkafu Nkemnkia 1999; Ramose 1999).

Therefore, the gift, as permeated by the *Ntu* principle, is a force of life. It is sacred but can also be dangerous to both receiver and giver. It is a point of contact with heightened or intensified spiritual energies, which is regarded as easily manipulatable by both the receiver and the giver to either increase or decrease the strength of the receiver's vital force. This means the often recognizable seemingly benevolent gesture can harbour a duality, carrying the potential for both benefit and harm, not only to the recipient but also to the giver (see also Ela 1984). The gift given or received with hidden or evil intentions is not a gift but witchcraft because it can potentially diminish the life force of another. As Marcel Mauss (1990: 16) observes from a different context, "The thing given is not inactive. Invested with life, often possessing individuality, it seeks to return to ... its 'place of origin' or to produce, on behalf of the clan and the native soil from which it sprang, an equivalent to replace it." The authenticity of the gift, therefore, lies not in mere giving and receiving but rather in its capacity to give or nurture life, increasing the strength of the vital force. This is essential for both receiver and giver to function meaningfully and flourish in the world. The power of the gift is in its ability to give life.

In essence, a gift is more than just a material object or token of goodwill; it serves as a unique point of contact with heightened or intensified spiritual energies. These energies are believed to possess the power to influence the receiver's vital force, which is the essence of their life and well-being. The ability to manipulate these spiritual energies lies in the hands of both the receiver and the giver. Depending on their intentions and actions, they can either amplify the strength of the receiver's vital force, thereby promoting health, happiness, and prosperity, or diminish it, leading to negative consequences and potential harm. This dual nature of the gift underscores the importance of intention and awareness in the act of giving and receiving. It emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of the spiritual and energetic aspects of such exchanges, encouraging individuals to use this knowledge for the betterment of themselves and others, while exercising caution and

responsibility in wielding the power of the gift. In this way, the sacred and potentially perilous nature of the gift can be harnessed for the greater good, fostering a harmonious and balanced relationship between the giver, the receiver, and the spiritual energies that bind them. To give is not just about co-sharing but also *mutual creationality* – it recognizes the inherent and inescapable mutual self-gift-ness for the well-being and flourishing of one another. There is an element of mutual recognition of each other as entangled gifts – “I am because we are” (*ubuntu*). Gifts serve as a locus of participation in each other’s lives and are regarded as sacred means of engaging in mutual existence, mutual solidarity, mutual becoming, and mutual holiness.

The Trinity finds its foundation in the eternal existence of the three entities as co-Gifts to one another. The Trinity represents the timeless and absolute self-giving of these three entities as the eternal Gift to one another. It signifies the eternal Gift of existing as God. The concept of gift is what renders existence possible and directs the giver toward a profound responsibility for the receiver. When God gave Jesus to the world, God essentially offered the trinitarian self.⁴ Creation, too, represents the self-giving of God’s life to the world. Creation actively participates in God’s life as the sole and ultimate source of life. The gift is not inert. It is alive and animated by the life of the giver. The gift carries with it the totality or spiritual core of the giver. In short, there is symbiotic relationship between the gift and the giver in which the giver fundamentally gives themselves through the gift. The receiver does not merely receive an inert object but an agentially charged presence of the giver. Hence, in the Christian sense, to receive the gift of God that is Jesus Christ is to fundamentally receive the Father. In this sense, the Holy Spirit is not merely a bond of love (*vinculum amoris*) connecting the Father and the Son, but also a medium through which the Father and the Son share each other to the creation as the eternal gift. In this sense, the Trinity is the eternal product of the selfless offering of the Holy Spirit to each as the eternal site of mutual offering among the members of the Trinity.

On Nyamiti: The Holy Spirit as the Gift in Ancestral Trinitarian Theology

In the early stages of his academic career, Nyamiti (1975a, 1975b; Vahakangas 1999) carried out ethnographic fieldwork on ancestral veneration among the Gikuyu of Kenya. He came to consider ancestral veneration as the cornerstone of African cultures, and ancestral relations as the foundational relations in African societies. His views were strongly influenced by Placide Tempels’s (1948) Bantu Philosophy and some of the consequent Catholic theologically attuned reinterpretations like those of Alexis Kagame (1955) and Vincent Mulago (1969). In theologizing, ancestral relations became the heuristic tool for Nyamiti through which he would be able to develop theological ideas. For Nyamiti, the core of ancestorship consisted of an active mimetic relationship between the ancestor and the descendants, realized especially in offerings to the ancestors. He interpreted these offerings as gifts given by the Descendant to the ancestor in the spirit of filial love. Eventually, he would claim that his theological insights were of such universal value that they should be adopted by the Roman Catholic Church (Nyamiti 1984: 147). This implies that for him, ancestral veneration and relationships were not restricted to African culture but a general human phenomenon. Despite his limited contextual starting point, Nyamiti considered himself, if not constructing universal theology, at least contributing to the shared content of Christian faith across the world.

Nyamiti’s theologizing builds on the Roman Catholic idea of *analogia entis* (see for example, Pope Benedict 2006), an analogy of being, between the Creator and the created. According to this idea, there is an ontological correspondence between the two. Due to the contingency of the

created order and the Fall, this analogy is partial, and therefore the reflection of the Creator in the creation is imperfect and even contaminated. That is why Nyamiti (1973: 4–6, 1971: 23) is careful to point out the need for elevation and purification of any cultural elements in theologizing. Nyamiti's theological starting point in *analogia entis* has been challenged in some Protestant theology, which considers that it diminishes the difference between the Creator and the created, and downplays the depravity following the Fall.⁵ Such criticism wants to see Christian faith as something alien to the created world, pure from this-worldly contamination. In this view, human salvation depends on divine grace alone, which means human will has absolutely no role. Such theological aspirations overlook the inevitable mediatedness of all Christian faith. No matter if the Gospel were the other-worldly pure message, it must be expressed in human language and culture, inevitably leading to variations, as many African theologians are acutely aware. Failing to recognize this easily leads to an ethnocentric view of one's own cultural expression as the pure Gospel, especially if that cultural expression has a provenience of centuries if not millennia. Critical views of foreign cultures and the new developments in one's own culture seldom exercises the same rigour with one's own old ecclesiastic culture.⁶ Such theological colonialism is seldom intentional or manifest but nonetheless latently existing. European and North American theologians of today seldom openly maintain that their theologizing is pure and universal but routinely refer and dialogue mostly among themselves and overlook the contextual nature of their endeavours. Protestant purism against *analogia entis* in the form it is usually seen is not useful in Africa because it easily leads to self-hating puritanism where whatever is traditional African is suspect or even evil while Western traditions are seen to represent Christian purity.

Nyamiti's decision for an *analogia entis* approach was theologically and philosophically consistent with his thinking. In his fundamental theology he combined Thomistic ontology and African traditions as expressed especially in ancestral veneration. For him, such Thomistic ontology was intellectually satisfying and a true expression of *philosophia perennis*, the eternal philosophical principles behind all sound theology. In the following, we seek to develop Nyamiti's theology, letting go of the Thomistic ontology. Therefore, let us summarize Nyamiti's main theology of the Trinity. Put briefly, the result of Nyamiti's ancestral theologizing in relation to the Trinity was the following: God is the source of all being, and therefore, the foundations of any true theology need to be based on the divine revelation of Godself.⁷ That is why Nyamiti needs to construct an ancestral theology of the Trinity. There, God the Father is the Ancestor who gives birth in the eternal moment to the Son, the Descendant. Because an ancestor is an ancestor only when there exists a sacred communication between the descendants and the ancestor, there must be such a relation for the Father to exist as the Ancestor. This sacred communication is the Holy Spirit, whom Nyamiti describes as the mutual Oblation, or a holy gift, between the Ancestor and the Descendant. In this manner, Nyamiti can argue for the absolute necessity of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not remain an odd addition to the Trinity but becomes the gift which keeps the Trinity together and therefore is an absolute precondition for God's being. Human ancestral relations reflect divine realities, albeit imperfectly. Yet, through them, humans can grasp something about the nature of God.

Because ancestral relations are the foundational interpersonal relations for Nyamiti, he not only considers them as constitutional to trinitarian and human relations but also to God–human relations. Nyamiti perceives Christ as the sibling⁸ ancestor of humankind. He points out that in some African cultures, even siblings can become ancestors. Christ's redemptive death and resurrection draws humans to be God's children and therefore Christ's adopted siblings. In this manner, Christ is the sibling ancestor of humankind, and believers are immersed in the inner trinitarian life of ancestral relationality (Nyamiti 2006, 2010). The trinitarian *opera ad intra* (internal work) and thereby

the being of the whole Godhead can be interpreted as mutual gifting. The fatherhood of the Father consists of begetting the Son and while the begetting gives life to the Son, at the same time, the Son donates life to the Father who would not exist without begetting the Son. Thus, these two-opera *ad intra* – begetting and being begotten – constitute these two trinitarian persons. The Holy Spirit, in turn, is the begetting that constitutes them both. Another analogy, that of the Logos (Word), is better for describing this dimension. The Father utters the Word by spirating it, and the Holy Spirit is that very spiration by which the Word is uttered. Without the spiration, the Word would just be a thought.

Nyamiti appears to have proposed the concept of an ontology of ancestorship, wherein all forms of ancestorship emerge as manifestations of various understandings and practices of ancestral imagination. These manifestations have historically found synchronicity in Jesus Christ through death and resurrection. From our perspective, all ancestral imaginations were constrained by their fixation on death, rendering them unable to transcend it. However, through resurrection, Jesus Christ conquers death and becomes the embodiment of ancestral fellowship. In the context of Jesus Christ, death and resurrection harmonize in an ongoing interaction with the Church as the Body of Christ. Fixation on death inherent in ancestral imagination is also a logical problem with God the Father as the Ancestor of the Son – there is no death to mention.

The idea of ancestry in reference to God points not so much to actualization after death as to a common concept of relationality inherent in and constitutive of all relations that is proper to both God and humanity, albeit in two radically distinct modes. God is the Ultimate Ancestor, while humanity can only become an ancestor through death as a mode of fully participating in the ultimate divine ancestorship (primary a spirituality function). This implies that human beings can only achieve ancestry through death, which serves as the means of overcoming spatial limitations, bridging the spiritual–physical chasm, and enabling the capacity to liberally traverse between these realms of existence. Therefore, ancestry is not merely about the differences that exist and persist between God and humanity; rather, it ancestry embodies difference, in the sense that it represents an inexplicably infinite divine ancestral unlikeness beyond human ancestral likeness. Human ancestry draws its spirituality, substance, intent and content from divine ancestry through an earthly life lived honourably as God’s gift for others and the common good, which culminates in full participation in divine ancestry through death. This is fundamental because ancestry, according to Nyamiti (2006: 162), “is essentially a pneumatic affair.” It can only be realized through achieving a spiritual mode of existence. In the trinitarian sense, this is actualized “in the Holy Spirit, and it is continually lived through the mutual donation of the divine Spirit between the Ancestor and the Descendant” (Nyamiti 2006: 162).

Considering that the core of this ancestral ontology is the ancestral relation, which in turn is crystallized in the Holy Spirit as the Oblation, or holy gift, we think it is justified to maintain that the concept of gift lies at the heart of Nyamiti’s theology. Through this concept, one can solve the problem of fixation on death. If ancestral relations in the Trinity are interpreted through the Gift, then Nyamiti’s trinitarian core finding still stands but without the logical problem of death within the Trinity. Likewise, when the Christ-event is perceived primarily through the concept of gift, the problem of attempting to fit resurrection into the image of an ancestor is no longer there. Rather, Christ can be seen as the Gift for the salvation of the Cosmos.

It is notable that for Nyamiti, perichoresis is a dynamic concept which he emphasizes in an African manner as circumincession (surrendering one’s selves into each other) rather than circumin-session (being or “sitting” in each other). He (Nyamiti 1998: 28) argues:

when *perichoresis* is considered as a mere being – as is the case in the Western in-one-another of the divine persons – then the trinitarian persons seem to our mind to be merely *passively* in one another; and the only

way by which the Father and the Son can be considered as having a responsibility corresponding to the right of the Holy Spirit in this case, is by regarding them as those who have the duty to *accept spontaneously* their being possessed by the divine Spirit through circuminsession. But this is not the case when *perichoresis* is taken in the African ancestral sense ... For in that case *perichoresis* appears as a *dynamic process*, since the Father and the Son are then seen to be totally in each other by medium of the Holy Spirit, whom they communicate actively to each other as their reciprocal ancestral Gift or Oblation, Doxology, and Eucharist.

In this case, therefore, for Nyamiti (1998: 28–29), “the perichoretic process alone would suffice to be considered as a responsibility or duty to be actively accomplished by the Father and the Son.” Nyamiti (1998: 28, 29, 39) sees “the vital and pneumatic *perichoresis*” as an “infinite intensity” trinitarian responsibility which is “actively” accomplishment through “dialogical spontaneous” intra-action. The Spirit is central to perichoretic activity as the one through which it is “realised and terminated” (Nyamiti 1998: 39). This dynamic perichoresis is grounded in the “eternal reciprocal communication in the Holy Spirit, whom “the Father as the Ancestor of the Son, and the Son as the Descendant of the Father, produce as the fruit of their mutual love” (Nyamiti 1999: 37). According to Nyamiti (1999: 37), this “communication takes place through their reciprocal donation of the divine Spirit as their mutual gift (i.e., as expression of their love) oblation (i.e., as a token of their mutual homage to their sanctity) and eucharistic (i.e., as manifestation of their gratitude to one another).” The idea of “producing” is certainly not utilized in a literal sense but, like all language in reference to what cannot ontologically be expressed in language, it is an attempt to capture the “unsayable” infinite production of the Spirit – the metaphorical dynamic activity within the Trinity. This means that the dynamic activity in the Trinity is beyond the scope of what language can fully describe or comprehend. In this case, the word “produce” is a linguistic tool to convey the concept of the infinite and dynamic pneumatic ritual activity between the Father and the Son which centres on co-donation of the Holy Spirit – an activity that is challenging to express directly in human language. The term serves as a metaphorical glimpse into the profound and ineffable nature of the eternal, pneumatic, ancestral ritual dynamic encounters involved. Nyamiti (1999: 37, 2006: 160) concludes that “divine ancestorship and descendancy are sacred, pneumatic, ritual, doxological and Eucharistic properties.” This way of interpreting the Trinity is deeply embedded in the African modes of thinking where personhood and existence are achieved and fulfilled, rather than individualistic self-actualization, through realization of co-boundedness of humanity and affirmation of one’s active duty and reciprocal entanglement (*ubuntu*) with the community.

In this ontological understanding of ancestorship and descendancy, the ultimate principle of Christ’s ancestral condition and salvific activities is deeply rooted in the pneumatic ritual of oblation (holy offering or gift) where the Holy Spirit, the Oblation, is spirated by the Father uttering the Logos. This profound foundation serves as the animating force behind Christ’s role as the Ancestor and exemplar of all members of the Church. Without this basis, the very concept of Christ’s ancestorship and redemptive work would be incomprehensible. Christ’s salvific work encompasses the redemption of humanity in both spiritual and physical dimensions. It is intricately tied to and firmly grounded in the profound mystery of the pneumatic ritual, Logos of the ritual, and descendancy within the Triune God. These elements form the core of Christ’s mission and connection to the divine. As Christ serves as the Ancestor and exemplar for all members of the Church, it follows that their endeavours and actions for the betterment of human society should be firmly rooted in their participation in the pneumatic ritual. Recognizing Christ’s functional role within the eternal action of the Trinity is essential for understanding the profound and transformative connection between Christ’s redemptive vital flow, pneumatic movement and the active engagement of the Church in the world as pneumatic ritual participation.

Christ's redemptive mission is intimately intertwined with the eternal action of the Trinity, serving as a profound reflection of the incomprehensible love and sacred interconnectedness within the Triune God. As the Body of Christ, the Church actively participates in this pneumatic ritual through its engagement in the world, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This active participation is life in the power of the Spirit, life as power which flows from God. As such, then, just like life or life force, also holiness as participation in the life of the Triune God is not the individual's property. Rather, it means living in and depending on the flow of life or force in the cosmos of interrelations. Life of faith is God's open invitation to a good, balanced, and relational life in God. The power of pneumatic ritual communication emerges from the "mutual, ancestral, and total self-giving" of the Ancestor to the Descendant "in the divine Spirit, whom they communicate to each other as the reciprocal Gift" (Nyamiti 2006: 36). This reciprocal Gift overflows into the universe and serves as the source of grace, drawing the Church into full and "unending participation in the eternal pneumatic ancestral ceremony in the Triune God" (Nyamiti 2006: 37).

Toward the Ecumenism of the Holiness of the Other in World Christianity

The holiness of the other in World Christianity holds significant implications for ecumenism in a wounded world. This is a kind of reinterpretation of Emmanuel Levinas's (1999) "ethics of the other." In this perspective, holiness as attribution *of* and participation *in* the holiness of Christ finds its true essence when directed towards others. We affirm Stanley Hauerwas's (1983: Kindle, loc. 788. Italics added for emphasis) argument that "the church does not have a social ethic" but we align with Nyamiti's perspective that the Church serves as the embodiment of the pneumatic social ethic of the holiness of the other. This perspective underscores the idea that the Church, as the embodied temple of pneumatic action, has a non-negotiable divine mandate to commit to a social ethic centred on honouring the sacredness inherent in all creation and each individual person, regardless of any form of difference. The primary mandate of the Church is to be the embodied temple of the Holy Spirit in the world. Hence, as Hauerwas (1983: Kindle, loc. 2310) argues, "The church does not let the world set its agenda about what constitutes a 'social ethic'" because it does not have its own agenda but exists to fulfil God's agenda to be the divine holy action in the world: it does this first by discerning how God is working "amid the injustice and violence of this world to care for the widow, the poor, and the orphan."

Ecumenical holiness of the other is not dogmatic or merely a state of being; rather, it is a way of becoming the Church and self-giving to the world as radical participation in the divine ancestral ritual. It transcends mere existence and becomes a way of life by treating the needs of fellow human beings and the world as sacred (Hendricks 2006). As a result, actions guided by holiness of the other not only consecrate those needs but also elevate human beings and the world to sanctity by entering into mutual self-giving in the likeness of God. This is the very holiness that Jesus highlighted in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). The holiness of actions is highlighted by Jesus in multiple instances within the Gospel. In many of these parables, such as the analogy of "the sheep and the goats" (Matthew 25:31–40) or "a tree and its fruit" (Luke 6:43–45), Jesus takes the argument as far as to assert that holiness is not only discernible or recognizable by life-giving actions but also constitutes the foundation of divine judgement. It appears Jesus is underlining holiness as a form of lived virtue that is only made palpable through life-giving actions, embodying Christ-like moral righteousness and the principles of the Kingdom of God in the world.

The Spirit as pneumatic overflow of vital ancestral activity within the Trinity points to the divine effort to overcome spiritual and material struggles of the people of God, who are organically connected with the spiritual world, all humanity, and the cosmic environment (Nyamiti 1999: 92). This points to a socially and ecologically engaged holiness, which intentionally seeks to promote “peace, justice, socio-economic development and other forms of human spiritual and bodily welfare – as necessary means to establish God’s kingdom in this world” (Nyamiti 2010: 38–39). In other words, the holiness of the Church is not static but rather manifests through the holiness of its actions in the world and its embrace of the holiness of the other (humanity and the world). It is not a matter of mere existence, but rather the living out of the life of Christ, giving oneself to the world in which the Church discovers and nurtures its holiness. This is the holiness that emanates from participating in the pneumatic ritual of the Trinity through Jesus Christ. The Church is called to engage in the sacred pneumatic gift, which demands holiness of social action: “so be holy in all you do” (1 Peter 1:15). God reserves the divine right for the Church to be holy in order to participate in the sacred pneumatic gift. As Paul argues, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1). This is not merely the holiness of being and becoming, but rather a holiness expressed through life-giving and nurturing actions. Again, it is argued, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness, no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14–15). This is the holiness of Christian life, in all its expressions, in its contribution to the actual transformation of human and more-than-human relationships, and the holy engagement and acts that recognize the intrinsic holiness present within the cosmos. The Church is the trinitarian gift of life to the world. It functions “as if” it were embodied divine action in the world. It is the critical presence of divine hope and the possibility of an alternative world, often described as the reign of God. The Church did not create itself and does not exist for itself; it is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who eternally overflows from the ancestral ritual in the Trinity. It can never claim any independent existence apart from being an embodied pneumatic ritual temple of trinitarian action in the world (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The divine mandate of the Church is to unconditionally participate in God’s life “as if” it were the *only locus* of God’s presence and activity in the world without negating other ways of life.

Such an active sacramental approach to the world is potentially life-giving and functionally powerful and could bring about earthed spiritual growth and deeper connections with God, other human beings, and creation. The holiness embedded in action and experienced through sacraments such as baptism in the Holy Spirit and Eucharist, emanates from Christ’s action in the world and the transformative pneumatic ritual within the Trinity. In this way, to participate in God’s life is to engage in a holy action; to be holy as God is holy. This requires fundamental vulnerable openness to the transformative and mysterious power of the Holy Spirit, to foster a deeper communion with God and strengthen relationships with others and the world.

The ecumenical holiness of the other does not originate within the Church; it emanates from the holiness of Christ’s action in the world and the transformative pneumatic ritual within the Trinity. This holiness is constantly evolving, encompassing social engagement and the transformation of humanity and the world. Being the Church means living in the relational power of the Triune God in the world where Christ’s holiness is discovered and actualized in the mundane of everyday. Holiness is grounded in missional action. By recognizing Christ’s and the Trinity’s relational holiness, the Church comes to understand that its mission is intricately connected to participation in the ongoing divine holiness of the world. This recognition ignites a transformative power within the Church, empowering it to actively participate in the divine life. The Church becomes an instrument for realizing its holiness in God, guided by a deep sense of purpose, authenticity, and unwavering

love. Therefore, the active engagement of the Church in the world, rooted in pneumatic ritual participation, becomes a sacred and transformative endeavour, as it aligns with the eternal action of the Trinity through Christ's redemptive mission. This understanding enables the Church to bring forth the transformative power of God's love and redemption to the world, serving as a vessel of divine grace and healing. In summary, the pneumatic ritual, Logos of the ritual, and descentance within the Triune God form the foundational and animating principles of Christ's ancestral condition and salvific work, and the Church's mission. It is through this understanding that the Church finds its true purpose and transformative power in the world.

Indeed, the Holy Spirit is the infinite pneumatic ritual of the Triune God embodying the mutual gift of eternal love within the Triune God. Jesus, as the Descendant, is the eternal Word spoken by God's pneumatic ritual (the divine expression and communication of God's love and wisdom). The Ancestor, in turn, is both the gift, the presence, the performer, and the recipient of this ongoing ritual, which is always already mutually and eternally performed and received within the divine essence. It is through this eternal pneumatic ritual that the Triune God reveals the depth of their love, holiness, and communion, manifesting the divine mystery in an infinite and harmonious exchange. The Holy Spirit is not bestowed on humans as a gift solely after the resurrection of Christ, but is inherently and ontologically the eternal Gift within the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is a sacred Gift to the world, embodying an intrinsic and reciprocal bestowal between the other two persons of the Trinity, rooted in their shared essence. The Holy Spirit is a divine gift to the world, representing the eternal mutual bondedness and perichoretic exchange between the Trinity and the world. The Holy Spirit represents God's perennial self-giving to the world (Nyamiti 1990).

Nyamiti's trinitarian ancestral spirituality of inculturation calls for embracing the sanctity of the diverse expressions of Christianity around the world as a source pneumatic wisdom for deeper understanding of and appreciation for the richness of the faith. Just as the pneumatic ritual is the eternal source of the oneness of God as the Trinity, it is also the source of the oneness of the Church in the world. This essentially implies unity in diversity and diversity in unity, as manifested and expressed across periods of time and cultural contexts. The Church expresses the holiness of action through unity in diversity, which is fundamental to authentic participation in the ancestral ritual within the Trinity. For Nyamiti (1990: 148), "It is a diversity which intrinsically leads to mutual love, concern, respect and reciprocal enrichment and consequent gratitude among the local churches." Nyamiti (1990: 150) adds, "The mutual holiness of the Father and the Son in the Trinity is the basis of their reciprocal communication and union in the Spirit." This pneumatic unitive ritual of holiness of action is not only communicated to the Church as the pneumatic ritual temple in the world but is also the prerequisite for being the Church that embodies divine action in the world.

The Holy Spirit is the trinitarian Gift that is infinitely and mutually always already shared within the eternal dance of the Trinity. It represents the inexplicable expression of reciprocal love between the eternal Ancestor (Father) and the eternal Descendant (Son), an unceasing exchange of divine communion that flows in perfect harmony. This Gift serves as an unbreakable bond, uniting the three persons of the Trinity as one, and allowing them to share in the very essence of God's love and wisdom. The Holy Spirit, as the eternal Gift, is in constant motion — being given and received, and giving and receiving — signifying the embodiment of unity and communion within the Triune God.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that Nyamiti's ancestral Christology shifts the perspective from the conventional understanding of ancestorship tied to biological age. Instead, he underlines an

ontological age that spans eras and defies the boundaries of spatial temporality. This perspective underscores the unique and unparalleled status of Jesus as the eternal Descendant of God who becomes the Ancestor of all humanity through death and resurrection. In this way, Jesus Christ's earthly life not only impacted history then, but continues to influence the course of history across generations. The fulfilment of Christ's promise to pour out the Holy Spirit on all flesh signifies everlasting validation, divine embrace, and the unbreakable connection of kinship between creation and divinity. Jesus, our ultimate exemplar, possesses a unique authority and inherent right to profound sacred encounters, through a deep pneumatic connection with the world and all human beings.

In Nyamiti's conception of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is the crucial dimension of God's being, the source and foundation of life force. The Holy Spirit, as the fruit and manifestation of the reciprocal, mutual love between the Ancestor and Descendant, is appropriately referred to as the Gift. Analogously, Nyamiti perceives the Holy Spirit as the ancestral Oblation between the Father and the Son in God. As expressed by Boulaga (1984: 35–36), "the Spirit is the present which God gives us, and in doing so, He invites us into His intimate presence because, above all else, He is the Gift exchanged between the Father and the Son out of their love." In essence, the Spirit of God is the Gift bestowed by God, which represents the mutual communicative offering of the other two persons of the Trinity, and the eternal perichoretic bondedness of the whole Trinity.

The Church is the gift of God to the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus argued, "as the Father has sent me, so also I am sending you" (John 20:21). The Holy Spirit is God's agential Gift of holy action in the world (Acts 1:8). The Church is a pneumatic source of divine shaped values of love, justice, mutuality, and interdependence ecumenism of life for all. The Holy Spirit is the source of holy consciousness of unified origin of the universal Church and its sources mutual responsibility to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8).

The Holy Spirit comes into the world as the Gift of God to a vulnerable community of believers in Acts 2, transforming their fears and vulnerability into the holiness of the other. The Church becomes the Church through agapeic self-giving and simultaneously resisting conformity to the standards of the world (Romans 12:2) and promoting ecumenism of the holiness of the other. This is the basis of participating in the pneumatic ritual of the Trinity and is achieved through critical actions of solidarity with humanity and the world in all its manifestations and experiences in the struggle for integral redemption, prophetic justice, authentic freedom, and expressive dignity. In other words, the Church was created to be the locus of ecumenical gift of God *from* and *to* the margins and those in struggle against the forces of death in the world.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. Here, ontology should not be read in the Hellenist Western sense but to refer to African ways of perceiving being through the concept of power of life. Therefore, Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia (1995) preferred to use the term "vitalogy" to replace philosophy or perhaps more specifically ontology in his texts. However, due to the fact that his proposal for new terminology has not gained much ground nor any other alternative proposal, we will be using the term ontology despite the risk of it misleading the reader to overlook the differences in Western and African ways of understanding the composition of reality.

2. Alexis Kagame (1955) identifies four categories of force in *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'Être*.
3. Ubuntu is the functional capacity to unconditionally “co-create or co-be(co)ming” the conditions for all things to effectively participate in harmonizing, balancing, reconciling, and flourishing.
4. For detailed explanation of this view see Kitamori (1965/1946, 1953) and Moltmann (1974).
5. The most notable Protestant theologian rejecting any sort of *analogia entis* was the influential Karl Barth. Eventually, he would develop his alternatives to *analogia entis*, like analogy of faith. Despite the terminological nearness to the Roman Catholic tradition, Barth continued rejecting the idea of continuity between the Creator and the created (Johnson 2010).
6. See Gustaf Aulén (1969), where he presents theorized models of Christologies. There, the “Christ above culture” model is, in principle, quite as rigorous towards one’s own culture as towards other cultures.
7. Note that Nyamiti was obviously unhappy with the gendering of God imposed by the English language: “Nor is there any distinction of Persons in Him between Father and Mother” (Nyamiti 1981: 14). He also wrote a study on the African God’s Motherhood (Nyamiti 1978). In Bantu languages, there is no gender differentiation between the personal pronouns.
8. In affirming the ongoing promotion of gender-sensitive language, we have replaced Nyamiti’s original concept “brother” with “sibling.”

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