



The African dimension of Nicaea: A historical and theological exploration

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ABSTRACT

The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) plays a pivotal role in shaping Christian doctrine, yet the historical connections between Nicaea and Africa remain understudied. This paper explores the intersections between the Nicene faith and African Christianity by examining the creed's reception, interpretation, and impact on African theological traditions. To illuminate the African dimensions of Nicaea's legacy and highlight the diversity of African Christian expressions, this study used a qualitative, historical-hermeneutical approach. Primary sources from the early Christian period, including the writings of Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian, were analyzed alongside secondary literature from African theology, patristics, and historical studies. A thematic analysis revealed complex, multifaceted relationships between Nicaea, African Christianity, and the Nicene Creed. Ultimately, this study sheds light on the significant role African Christians played in shaping early Christian doctrine, contributing to a deeper understanding of African engagement with early orthodoxy and emphasizing the ongoing importance of African perspectives in Christian theology.

Keywords: Council of Nicaea, Nicene Creed, African Christianity, Theological Traditions, Historical-hermeneutical.

INTRODUCTION

The Council of Nicaea, convened in 325 CE, stands as a pivotal moment in the development of Christian doctrine.¹ Its formulation of the Nicene Creed permanently reshaped Christian theology by establishing parameters for trinitarianism and Christology.² However, despite its profound influence, the intersections between the historic council and African Christian traditions remain largely understudied.³ This oversight is significant, given the rich, complex theological landscape of the continent, which has long influenced broader ecclesial history.⁴ To address this gap, this study illuminates the overlooked African dimensions of this

¹ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, vol. 13 (Oxford University Press, 2004); Frances Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, vol. 9 (SCM Press London, 1983).

² John Norman Davidson Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Routledge, 2014).

³ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh Univ. Press [ua], 1995).

⁴ John S Mbiti, "African Religions and Philosophy," *Johannesburg: Heinemann*, 1969; Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450–1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

doctrinal legacy. Using a qualitative, historical-hermeneutical approach, this research analyzes early primary sources, focusing specifically on the foundational writings of African Church Fathers such as Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian.⁵

To guide this investigation, the study addresses the following question: How did early African Church Fathers influence, interpret, or respond to the theological developments surrounding the Nicene Council? In what ways has the Nicene Creed been received and adapted within distinct African theological expressions over time? In addressing the central questions, this study examined the primary texts of Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian to uncover early African perspectives on Nicene theology. To analyze the historical reception and interpretation of the creed within continental traditions. To synthesize these findings to provide a more inclusive, globally accurate narrative of early church history.

This study is highly significant because it challenges Eurocentric biases in church historiography by recovering the vital, localized contributions of African thought to universal dogma. By mapping these hidden connections, the research offers contemporary theologians a postcolonial framework to better understand how ancient traditions interact with regional identities. Significantly, it enriches modern global theology by demonstrating that early African scholarship was not merely a passive recipient of doctrine, but an active architect of it.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, historical-hermeneutical approach to explore the intersections between the Nicene faith and African Christianity. Using this design, the study focused on interpreting historical texts within their cultural environments to uncover shared theological themes and identities. Data collection relied on a purposive sampling strategy to select both primary and secondary texts that directly address the intersection of early ecumenical orthodoxy and African identity. The criteria for selecting primary texts required that they be authored by early African Church Fathers and explicitly deal with foundational doctrines of Origen's commentary on the Gospel of John,⁶ which examined early African Christological developments; Tertullian's treatises on theology and ethics⁷ that assessed early Latin-African theological terminology; and Cyprian's letters and treatises on church unity and sacraments⁸ which investigated early African ecclesiology. Secondary sources were selected based on their prominence within modern African Theology and early Church History.

The selection prioritized seminal texts by foundational African theologians, specifically the works of Kwame Bediako and Bénézet Bujo, focusing on their evaluations of African Christian identity.⁹

Furthermore, historical studies regarding the spread of Christianity in Africa and its interactions with local cultures were reviewed to anchor the ancient texts within a broader historical-critical consciousness of the early Church Fathers, including their theological debates and cultural contexts.¹⁰ Research on the history of Christianity in Africa, including the spread of Christianity and its interactions with local cultures, will be reviewed to gain a deep understanding of the African contribution to this study.¹¹ For data analysis, the study will conduct thematic analysis following the established six-phase qualitative framework popularized by Braun and Clarke.¹²

⁵ Heine Origen and E Ronald, "Commentary on the Gospel According to John," (*No Title*), 1993; Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullian, *Reprint. On the Flesh of Christ* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2013); Thascius Caccilius Cyprianus and Graeme W Clarke, "The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage," 1984.

⁶ Origen and Ronald, "Commentary on the Gospel According to John."

⁷ Tertullian, *Reprint. On the Flesh of Christ*.

⁸ Cyprianus and Clarke, "The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage."

⁹ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*; Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006).

¹⁰ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*; Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*; Kwame Aidan Ahaligah, "Early African Christianity—a Thematic Analysis," *EJ Relig Theol Stud* 6 (2020): 264–73.

¹¹ John S Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990); Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950* (Clarendon Press, 1995).

¹² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

The primary and secondary texts were subjected to repeated, close readings. Initial reflective notes were recorded regarding how Nicene concepts matched or diverged from modern African theological expressions.¹³ Semantic and latent features of the text were systematically coded across the entire dataset. Labels such as ancestral Christology, divine substance, communal unity and vernacular translation were applied to relevant passages. Additionally, the compiled codes were clustered into broader, candidate conceptual themes that addressed the overlap between the Council of Nicaea, the Nicene Creed, and African Christianity.¹⁴ A review of themes was performed where candidate themes were checked against the specific extracted text segments and the entire data set to ensure conceptual consistency and resolve any contradictory data. Furthermore, themes were conceptualized, organized and clearly named to capture the exact nature of the African contribution to, and reception of, the Nicene faith. Last but not least, the final analysis linked the empirical data from the texts to the broader research questions, using key quotations from the Church Fathers and African theologians to sustain the argument.

The study operated within a hermeneutical interpretive framework, acknowledging that meaning is co-constituted through a dialogue between historical texts and the researcher's context. To establish qualitative trustworthiness, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's criteria:

Where credibility was achieved through persistent engagement with the texts and structural corroboration by constantly cross-referencing primary patristic arguments with secondary modern African interpretations. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail. Every phase of the coding process, context notation, and tracking of analytical decisions was clearly documented.¹⁵ Several inherent limitations were present within this research design. The study relied on translated versions of primary Latin and Greek texts, which may obscure subtle linguistic nuances specific to early North African dialects. Geographically, the primary African sources utilized were historically situated in early Mediterranean Africa (Carthage and Alexandria), meaning the findings cannot be generalized to represent the historical trajectory of the entire African continent.¹⁶ Historical distance was a limitation in that the extensive chronological gap between the 4th-century Nicene context and modern 20th/21st-century African theology carries the risk of anachronistic interpretation, which required careful historical-critical boundaries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review draws on various fields, including African theology, patristics, and historical studies. The key themes and topics explored are African Christianity, the Nicene Creed, the Council of Nicaea, and African Church Fathers.

African Christianity

The development and diversity of Christian traditions in Africa, including their interactions with local cultures and philosophies, give a deeper understanding of how Africans contributed and shaped the doctrinal standards of Christianity today.¹⁷ For Sundkler and Steed,

Conventional Church history has been written as if Christianity were imposed on Africa from outside, rather than being an authentic part of African identity. This perspective downplays the African viewpoint and initiative, focusing instead on the activities of missionaries and external influences.¹⁸

Christianity in Africa has evolved into a rich tapestry of faith and culture, woven from the threads of local traditions, philosophies, and Christian beliefs. As Africans made faith their own, they have created a

¹³ Kelvin Mwita and Nivad Mwilongo, "Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Research Data: A Seven-Step Guide," *Eminent Journal of Business and Management* 1, no. 1 (March 30, 2025): 51–59, <https://doi.org/10.70582/4ajw7k14>.

¹⁴ Mwita and Mwilongo, "Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Research Data: A Seven-Step Guide."

¹⁵ Daniel H Grosseohme, "Overview of Qualitative Research," *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 20, no. 3 (2014): 109–22.

¹⁶ Mwita and Mwilongo, "Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Research Data: A Seven-Step Guide."

¹⁷ Laurent Magesa, "African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life. Orbis Books: New York. 1997," 1997; Kā Mana, *Christians and Churches of Africa: Salvation in Christ and Building a New Life* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2002).

¹⁸ Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

distinctive brand of Christianity that reflects their cultural heritage and experiences. This Africanized Christianity is a testament to the dynamic and adaptive nature of faith in diverse cultural contexts.

Bediako argues that, from a Christian standpoint, history turns out to be an exploration of cultural identity in which Christ is not only the solution to humanity's past quests, including its religious yearnings, but also the decisive interpreter and unifying element of every human endeavor.¹⁹ Walls adds that the desire to make Christianity feel "at home" within a people's culture, language, and way of life lies at the heart of the gospel, because the gospel proclaims that God meets us exactly where we are, based on what Christ has accomplished.²⁰ Recognizing Africa's Christian past shows that the Church ought to be, and can be, "a place to feel at home" for Africans.²¹ It also makes it untenable to claim that Christianity is a European import or "a white man's religion." African Christianity predates the English, French, Portuguese, and German languages; it had already become an authentic African expression of the faith centuries before the rise of Islam. In Egypt and North Africa, Christianity is as old as the New Testament itself, which already mentions black African believers. Sub-Saharan churches continue to boast a seventeen-hundred-year history.²² Indigenous African churches, such as the Coptic Church of Egypt, the Aksumite Church of present-day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, and the Nubian Church of modern Sudan, possessed Scripture in their own mother tongues and fully developed liturgies while Celtic forebears were still painting themselves blue and practicing human sacrifice. We should know and celebrate these African Christian stories. Although conventional church-history textbooks have largely overlooked Africa's role, this omission is beginning to be corrected.

Nicene Creed

The historical context, theological significance, and reception of the Nicene Creed in African Christianity are rooted in the 4th-century Roman Empire, where Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea to resolve the Arian controversy and establish a universal statement of Christian belief against false teachings.²³ Its theological significance lies in affirming the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Trinity, making it the central confession of faith for much of Christianity. In African Christianity, the reception of the Nicene Creed has been shaped by its patristic roots in North Africa, its colonial encounter, and the ongoing process of indigenization, where it is increasingly understood not just as a Western dogma but as a universally shared African doxology arising from lived experience.

The historical context in Africa is rooted in patristic tradition. North Africa was a vibrant center of early Christianity and the home of many prominent theologians, including Tertullian and Augustine. The council itself was called in the context of persecution, which gave the Creed a powerful relevance for those who have faced oppression.²⁴ Another context is the colonial encounter, where some African theologians view the Creed's association with colonization as a complex issue, given its adoption by imperial power. This perspective challenges the purely Western interpretation of the Creed and calls for the decolonial turn.²⁵ It is from contemporary scholarship that emphasizes an African perspective, re-evaluating the Creed through a decolonial lens and seeking to integrate it with indigenous African philosophy and practice as espoused by Bediako.²⁶

Considering the theological significance, the Nicene Creed affirms the doctrine of the Trinity. The Creed is crucial to defining the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one being. Furthermore, it affirms the divinity of Jesus. It counters Arianism by affirming Jesus as "consubstantial" (of

¹⁹ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*.

²⁰ Andrew F. Walls, "Africa and Christian Identity," *Mission Focus* 6 (1978): 11–13.

²¹ Frederick B Welbourn and Bethwell A Ogot, "A Place to Feel at Home: A Study of Two Independent Churches in Western Kenya," 1966.

²² Andrew F Walls, "The Cost of Discipleship The Witness of the African Church," *Crossing Cultural Frontiers*, 2005, 79–90.

²³ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*; Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, 4.

²⁴ J N Kanyua Mugambi, "African Christian Theology: An Introduction," 1989, 7.

²⁵ Andrew M Mbuvi, *African biblical studies: unmasking embedded racism and colonialism in biblical studies*, (London: T&T Clark, 2023)123

²⁶ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*.

the same substance) with the Father, thereby establishing the orthodox understanding of the Christian God.²⁷ The Creed has a universal Christian identity. As the only ecumenical creed, it serves as a binding statement of faith that unites diverse Christian traditions worldwide. For the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Professor Jerry Pillay, he has this to say,

As we commemorate the Council of Nicaea, we're reminded of its lasting impact on Christian unity and our shared commitment to living out the apostolic faith. The council's affirmation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior remains a cornerstone of our faith, guiding us. In a world fraught with ideological conflicts, we must boldly yet compassionately proclaim the Good News, respecting other religions and valuing interfaith dialogue (Message by Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay, WCC General Secretary at the webinar “From Nicaea, Walking Together to Unity: The Beginning of a New Beginning”, 8 February 2024).²⁸

The key points derived from the above that resonate with the African perspective of Nicaea are that it promotes unity and ecumenism. The Council of Nicaea renews our call for full visible unity, a fundamental aspect of the ecumenical movement. Our goal is a unity that is not only theological but also visible and tangible, reflecting the oneness of Christ's body. The Nicene Creed represents a unifying thread that links us across confessional and cultural divides. It reminds us of our shared heritage and core beliefs, providing a foundation for unity and mutual understanding. The legacy of Nicaea continues to shape Christian history, and its significance extends beyond doctrine to guide our living faith today. By embracing our shared heritage and core beliefs, we can build towards unity and mutual understanding, reflecting the oneness of Christ's body.

Council of Nicaea

The impact and legacy of the Council of Nicaea on African Christian thought and practice have played a significant part in African Christianity.²⁹ The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) had a dual impact on African Christian thought and practice because it provided a unifying and orthodox Christological foundation through the Nicene Creed, which endorsed Christ's divinity, which was a crucial step in defining Christian doctrine globally, including in Africa. On the negative side, it also set a precedent for imperial involvement in church affairs and theological enforcement that created division and tension, particularly evident in the Alexandrian context, where Arianism had strong roots.³⁰ The council's decisions helped to consolidate core Christian beliefs, such as the Trinity and the nature of Christ. Its enforcement under Emperor Constantine began an entanglement of church and state, fostering new conflicts and power struggles within Africa and beyond.

The impact of the Council of Nicaea was its ability to define Christology. In other words, the council's central achievement was the establishment of the Nicene Creed, which declared that the Son was “of the same substance” (homoousias) as the Father, thus solidifying the orthodox view of Christ's full divinity against the Arian heresy, which viewed Christ as a created being.³¹ The Council laid the foundation for the Trinity by clarifying the relationship between the Father and the Son. Furthermore, Nicaea laid the theological groundwork for the subsequent development of the complete Nicene Trinitarian doctrine, a concept integral to African Christian theology as well. There is a noticeable shift in theological authority, where the council changes and theological debates are removed from local church discussions, which were

²⁷ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (Yale University Press, 2003), xvi-xvii..

²⁸ World Council of Churches, *The Council of Nicaea and Its Meaning for Today's World*, Message by Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay, WCC General Secretary at the Webinar “From Nicaea, Walking Together to Unity: The Beginning of a New Beginning” (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2024). <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-council-of-nicaea-and-its-meaning-for-the-todays-world-message-by-rev-prof-dr-jerry-pillay#:~:text=Dr%20Jerry%20Pillay%2C%20WCC%20General,New%20Beginning%E2%80%9D%2C%208%20February%202024.>

²⁹ Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*; Richard Patrick Crossland Hanson and Richard P Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381 AD* (A&C Black, 2005).

³⁰ Orobator, Agbonkhianmeghe E. From Nicaea to Africa: legacy, inspiration, and cultural contextualization of Theology. *Theological Studies*, 86(3), (2025):414-436. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639251350904>

³¹ Alister E McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

under the influence of imperial power, creating a precedent for how theological disputes would be handled in the future, including in Africa. This study concluded that theological discussions in mainline churches take place at global ecumenical stages, such as the World Council of Churches, continental levels, the All-Africa Conference of Churches, and regional levels, such as the Zimbabwe Council of Churches.

The Council of Nicaea had an impact on Christian practice, observing the genesis of imperial influence. Emperor Constantine's summoning and involvement in the council led to a new era where imperial authority became intertwined with church governance, a dynamic that affects practices in some African churches today. In Zimbabwe, political powers of politics want to identify themselves with church denominations to maintain the status quo of power dynamics. Furthermore, the council's rulings and debates, such as those regarding the dislike of Libyan bishops for Alexandrian authority, demonstrate the practical and organizational aspects of power struggles within the church, issues that also manifested in African church governance.

African Church Fathers

The contributions of early Christian leaders and theologians from Africa, such as Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian, to the development of Christian doctrine and practice marked a turning point in African Christianity to date.³² African Church Fathers like Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian profoundly shaped early Christian doctrine and practice by defining the Trinity and establishing Latin theological terms (Tertullian), using allegorical interpretation and philosophical theology (Origen), and developing concepts of episcopal authority and church governance (Cyprian). Their work provided foundational frameworks for defending the faith, clarifying complex theological concepts, and establishing structures that influenced Western and global Christianity.

Tertullian (c. 155–c. 220)

Tertullian, whose full name was Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, came from the Roman province of Africa, roughly the area of today's Tunisia. Though born to pagan parents and trained as a lawyer, he seems to have traveled to Italy but spent most of his life in Carthage.³³ Tertullian was a groundbreaking figure in Western Christianity, both in what he taught and in the language he used. He was the first to clearly state the doctrine of the Trinity, and he helped create much of the Latin vocabulary that Christians still use today. In other words, he was the first known writer to use the term "trinitas" (Trinity) and coined key terms like "substantia" to describe the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.³⁴ He is also the earliest Latin writer to quote the Bible freely, and he begins a distinguished line of church fathers, including Cyprian, Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine, that no other Christian tradition can match. Furthermore, Tertullian wrote defenses of Christianity against paganism and heresies in his work *Apologeticum*, a significant text in the development of orthodox doctrine. In regard to a Theological Framework, Tertullian established many of the essential concepts and terms in Latin Christianity, providing a decisive framework for future theologians.

However, Tertullian's writing is very hard to read. His style is even more compact than that of the famous historian Tacitus, which often makes his meaning unclear. He mixes legal jargon, Greek words, and everyday speech, so without a special dictionary or index, it can be difficult to know exactly what a word means. Scholars now recognize how important his work is and are urging someone to compile a full lexicon of his language, but we will never understand his vocabulary and phrasing as well as we do for later writers like Jerome or Augustine. Because his texts were largely ignored in the Middle Ages, only a few good manuscripts survive, and many parts of his writing may never be restored with certainty.

³² Origen and Ronald, "Commentary on the Gospel According to John"; Tertullian, *Reprint. On the Flesh of Christ*; Cyprianus and Clarke, "The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage."

³³ Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus and Alexander Souter, *Tertullian Concerning the Resurrection of the Flesh* (Soc. for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1922).

³⁴ Tertullian, *Reprint. On the Flesh of Christ*.

Origen (c. 185–c. 253)

Origen played a pivotal role in biblical interpretation, where he is known as a creative theologian and one of the greatest biblical interpreters. He used the allegorical method extensively in his commentaries.³⁵ Additionally, he laid the foundation for philosophical theology within the Church, though some of his interpretations were later considered heretical. Regarding Christology, Origen defended the incarnation of Christ, the belief that Jesus was both fully God and fully human, against Docetism. As such, he contributed significantly to the doctrine of the Trinity as an African theologian. His contribution shaped the theological thinking within the ecumenical councils.

Cyprian (c. 200–258)

Cyprian used episcopal authority to articulate the concept of apostolic succession, asserting that bishops held authority derived from the apostles, which is foundational to the Catholic Church. Furthermore, he brought church unity and governance when he emphasized the importance of unity within the church and established principles of church organization and discipline during a period of rapid growth. This then created an environment in which ecumenism flourished and brought together leaders within the religious fraternity to discuss theological concepts, including the Trinity, Christology, and grace, which were fundamental debates within the Christian ecumenical councils.

In summary, the impact on Christian development of the African icons is that these African leaders were instrumental in defending the faith. They provided theological arguments and frameworks to defend Christian doctrines against paganism, heresy, and other religions. They developed doctrine by shaping complex theological concepts such as the Trinity, Christology, and grace, which became central to Christian thought. Furthermore, they established practice through their writings, which influenced the development of Christian rites, ascetic practices, and the structure of church governance and authority. Additionally, they influenced Western Christianity. Their work in North Africa laid significant groundwork for Western Christianity, with figures like Augustine of Hippo (another African Father) profoundly impacting subsequent theology.

The Reception of the Nicene Creed in African Christianity: From Dogma to Doxology

African Christians played a significant role in the reception, interpretation and ongoing contextualization of the Nicene Creed. The creed's affirmation of Jesus Christ as "consubstantial with the Father" resonated with African Christian traditions that emphasized the divinity of Christ.³⁶ Historically, North African Church Fathers like Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian deeply shaped the early Trinitarian and Christological debates that anticipated Nicene categories.³⁷ In contemporary African theology, the reception of the creed represents a deliberate movement from Western structural dogma to African doxology, transforming a precise philosophical confession into a communal expression of praise. As scholar Adamo notes, the creed is not merely a foreign artifact imported into Africa; rather, it has been actively reclaimed through the lens of inculturation theology.³⁸ Inculturation is not a simple matching game between Greek philosophy and African traditions. Instead, it is a critical, dialogical process in which the Christian message takes root within a culture, transforming the culture while allowing the cultural context to illuminate new depths of the gospel.

To bridge the historical gap, contemporary African theologians engage in contextual reinterpretation. They use cultural concepts as analogical tools rather than claiming exact philosophical equivalence with Nicene categories. For Clarke, different thoughts permeate scholarly circles: while some have viewed the Creed as alien to African contexts, others now see it as a doxology (expression of praise) that has deep roots in African Christian communities.³⁹

³⁵ Origen and Ronald, "Commentary on the Gospel According to John."

³⁶ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*.

³⁷ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*.

³⁸ David T Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion (s): The Postcolonial Round of Engagement," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32, no. 1 (2011): 1–10.

³⁹ Cyprianus and Clarke, "The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage."

The Nicene assertion that Jesus Christ is "consubstantial" (*homoousios*) with the Father was originally formulated using Greek metaphysical categories of being and substance. Through the lens of inculturation, African theologians reinterpret this category relationally rather than structurally. The idea of Jesus being "of one substance" with God is theologically reflected upon through African concepts of vital unity and community. However, a critical distinction must be maintained: *homoousios* addresses Christ's ontological, eternal being with the Father, whereas African communal frameworks primarily describe relational and ethical interconnectedness.⁴⁰ African traditions place a significant emphasis on ancestral ties and the communion of the living and the dead. In inculturation theology, Jesus' divinity and unique unity with God are often reflected upon through "Ancestral Christology" (as seen in the work of Bénézet Bujo and Charles Nyamiti). Jesus is sometimes confessed as the "Proto-Ancestor" or "Supreme Ancestor." This is a contextual theological reflection, not a literal equivalence. Although traditional ancestors are intermediaries who attain status after death, Christ's Nicene status denotes eternal uncreated divinity. The ancestral framework serves as a pedagogical bridge to explain His place at the apex of the divine family.⁴¹

The philosophy of *Ubuntu* ("a person is a person through other persons") is frequently used to interpret the relational unity of the Trinity. Theologians use *Ubuntu* to parallel the perichoresis (mutual indwelling) of the Father and the Son. Critically, while *Ubuntu* describes human horizontal relationality and dependency, the Nicene category describes a vertical, divine, and consubstantial reality. *Ubuntu* does not explain *how* Christ is divine, but offers an experiential mirror for understanding the perfect, loving unity of the Godhead.⁴² The traditional African worldview generally features a Supreme Being operating through a hierarchy of spiritual intermediaries. Interpreting Jesus through this lens requires careful inculturation. If evaluated uncritically, matching Jesus to an intermediary risks reducing Him to a highly exalted creature, inadvertently falling into the Arian heresy that Nicea sought to correct. Therefore, inculturation theology reframes this worldview: Jesus does not merely occupy a space between humanity and God; as the consubstantial Son, He is the Supreme Creator who has entered into human history.⁴³ Through these intentional, critical reinterpretations, African Christianity avoids a superficial syncretism. By treating cultural concepts as theological reflections rather than exact matches, inculturation theology allows the Nicene Creed to remain dogmatically faithful while becoming liturgically and relationally alive in the African context.⁴⁴

The concept of indigenization is also one aspect that shows the reception of the Nicene Creed in Africa. Modern African theology seeks to make the Creed more relevant by integrating it with local African cultures, philosophies, and experiences, as seen in the attempt to build an integrated understanding of sexuality based on both the Creed and African perspectives. Furthermore, in Africa, as part of receiving the Nicene Creed, theologians have now taken it as a contemporary resource. Rather than dismissing the Creed, many African scholars and church leaders now find it to be a rich theological resource, particularly for addressing contemporary issues such as digital ethics, alongside the growing challenge of decolonial thought.

African Christian Expressions and the Nicene Creed

African Christian expressions are characterized by a rich diversity and complexity.⁴⁵ A vibrant interplay between local cultures and Christian traditions marks the theological landscape of the continent.⁴⁶ The Nicene Creed, as a foundational document of Christian doctrine, has been received and interpreted in various ways in Africa. From the early Christian communities in Egypt and North Africa to the modern-day churches in sub-Saharan Africa, the creed has been a unifying force, shaping African Christian identities and practices.

⁴⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 108.

⁴¹ Bishop E Morris, "Early Missionaries' Interaction with African Worldviews and Cultures," *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies* 4, no. 3 (2018): 30–45.

⁴² Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (Random House, 2000), 34..

⁴³ Bolaji E. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973).

⁴⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).

⁴⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*; Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*.

⁴⁶ Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*.

One can develop an African Christian expression and contextualization of the Nicene Creed in the following paraphrased ubuntu version to accommodate an African flavour and an easy-to-understand philosophy:

*We believe in one God, the Father, the Great Ancestor,
From whom all creation is interconnected and one.
We believe in Jesus Christ, the Elder Brother,
Who embodies ubuntu, showing us the way of love and unity.
He suffered, died, and rose, reconciling all to God and each other.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Breath of Life,
Who empowers us to live in harmony, respecting creation's balance?
We are one in Christ; through ubuntu, we are family.*

Elements of Ubuntu philosophy and communal harmony are fused together to relate the Nicene Creed well to Africa. This expression incorporates African concepts like ubuntu, emphasizing interconnectedness and community.⁴⁷ Furthermore, it brings in the role of an ancestor, describing God as the Great Ancestor, highlighting familial ties.⁴⁸ It further explores African concepts such as ubuntu and ancestor worship and their relevance to Christian theology. Last but not least, the aspect of the elder brother portrays Jesus in a relational, communal role.⁴⁹ He examines African Christian expressions and the inculturation of the Nicene Creed to fit in with diverse traditions.

The Impact of Nicaea on African Theological Traditions

The Council of Nicaea has had a lasting impact on African theological traditions.⁵⁰ The creed's emphasis on the divinity of Christ and the Trinity has shaped African Christian understandings of God and salvation.⁵¹ African theologians have drawn on the Nicene Creed to articulate their own theological perspectives, often blending local cultural insights with Christian doctrine.⁵² This blending of traditions has resulted in a unique African Christian identity that is both rooted in the global Christian tradition and distinctively African. For Ottawa, Africa was at the heart of gospel defense at Nicaea then, and it must be at the heart of defense now against the prosperity gospel. He further observed that it is easy to forget that Nicaea was not a European event, but a global one. Among the bishops were African voices such as Alexander of Alexandria, the bishop who first confronted Arius; and, most famously, Athanasius of Alexandria, then a young deacon, who defended Christ's deity against Arius's denials. Africa was instrumental in preserving the Church's confession of Christ.⁵³ It is critical to note that the impact of Nicaea became alive in 2025, the 1700th anniversary of the first ecumenical council at Nicaea (A.D. 325) being commemorated by various Christian denominations, with a focus on ecumenical unity, the Nicene Creed, and a shared date for Easter. The anniversary highlights the foundational role of the council in defining Christian doctrine, particularly with regard to the divinity of Christ. Africa was not left behind, as various Christian faiths participated in different forms. Key events and themes regarding the "Nicaea 2025" commemoration include, among others, an ecumenical focus where major gatherings, such as the World Council of Churches' Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order in Egypt (October 2025), focused on the theme "Where now for visible unity?"⁵⁴ Its impact is also reflected in the Papal visit, where Pope Leo XIV visited the site of the Council of Nicaea (modern-day İznik, Türkiye) on the 30th of November 2025 to meet with Patriarch Bartholomew and other

⁴⁷ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*.

⁴⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*.

⁴⁹ John Samuel Pabee, *Skenosis: Christian Faith in an African Context* (Mambo Pr., 1992).

⁵⁰ Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*.

⁵¹ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*.

⁵² Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*.

⁵³ Danson Ottawa, "From Nicaea to Nairobi: Guarding the Gospel in Africa Today," 2025. Accessed 12 December 2025 from: <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org/article/from-nicaea-to-nairobi-guarding-the-gospel-in-africa-today/>.

⁵⁴ World Council of Churches, *Nicaea 2025 – Living the Apostolic Faith Together Today* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2025).

Christian leaders. This became the highlight of the Pope's visit for the ecumenical significance of Nicaea.⁵⁵ Furthermore, there is a theological significance, particularly in 2025, when the year emphasizes the enduring relevance of the Nicene Creed, which affirms the consubstantial divinity of the Son. In the academic fraternity, academic symposiums were held where various international conferences examined the impact of the council on Christian doctrine, its historical context and its role in fostering interfaith dialogue. The commemorations highlight Nicaea not just as a historical event but as a compass for current ecumenical relations, particularly between Catholics and Orthodox churches.

CONCLUSION

The connections between Nicaea and African Christianity are complex and multifaceted. This article has highlighted the often-overlooked African dimensions of Nicaea's legacy, showcasing the significant role African Christians played in shaping early Christian doctrine. By examining the reception, interpretation, and impact of the Nicene Creed on African theological traditions, this study has demonstrated the rich diversity and complexity of African Christian expressions. As the global Christian community continues to evolve, it is essential to recognize and appreciate the contributions of African Christians to the development of Christian doctrine and practice.

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⁵⁵ Christopher Wells, *Apostolic Journey to Terkiye: Day Four* (Vatican News, 2025). Accessed 31 December 2025 from: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-11/final-highlights-pope-leo-xiv-apostolic-journey-turkiye.html>

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