

AFRICAN IDENTITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF MODERNITY

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Abstract

The achievements of African intellectual endeavour in the decades since independence have been extraordinary. In multiple fields of enquiry and expression Africa has thrown off alien dominance and asserted its own energetic perspectives. The urgent question emerging among Africa's educated elite is whether the ideological underpinnings of Africa's post-independence era is sufficient for securing Africa's future. This intellectual transition accents one of the principal challenges facing African theology. Africa has urgently needed the aid of critical reflection in coping with a modernity already pervasive within contemporary Africa, and in negotiating its future within the increasing interdependency of the world community. The affirmation and defence of the "otherness" of Africa has been essential but will it be sufficient for addressing Africa's present crises or future expectations? This paper will discuss the phenomenon of African theology in terms of its development, sources and future prospects.

INTRODUCTION

Church leaders and theological educators in many cases have assumed that African theology denotes little more than providing traditional Christian theology with an African face, furnishing Christian truth with pastoral and catechetical contextually-sensitive illustrations and applications especially as it is affected by traditional culture, for example with respect to rites of passage, polygamy, liturgical custom, divination, traditional healing or the role of ancestors. However the range and caliber of contributions called forth by African theology as it has explored the interface be-

tween Christianity and African culture has been exceptionally fruitful.

African theologians serving in church leadership roles have been in the forefront of those tending to focus on African culture as a whole, not just on African religion, reflecting theologically on the necessary "contextualization" of Christianity within culture. Catholic reflection has vigorously debated whether adaptation or incarnation is the more appropriate theological methodology, while one strand of Catholic reflection has also probed usefully into the underlying world views or "implicit philosophies" of traditional Africa (Katongole 2001). Protestant reflection has often led the way in looking for points of contact between standard themes of Christian theology (such as revelation, sin, Christology or eschatology) and those values, institutions, concepts and symbols which underlie African culture (Bowers 2001:33). Church leadership participating in the theological discussion has tended to frame its reflection much more directly in terms of pastoral and catechetical needs of the believing Christian community in Africa, especially as it is affected by traditional culture, for example with respects to rites of passage, polygamy, liturgical customs, divination, traditional healing or the role of ancestors.

Reflecting a rooted need to disentangle African Christianity from its immediate antecedents in order to achieve a separate indigenous identity and echoing the standard perceptions of African nationalist ideology, African theology has almost from the beginning felt impelled to deploy a set critique of the missionary movement and of its destructive impact on traditional values and culture (Idouw 1965, Mbiti 1969 & 1970, Bediako 1992). The twenty-first century presents a special challenge as Africa has been thrust into the center of global conversation on religion, culture, society. The affirmation and defence of the "otherness" of Africa

has been essential but the urgent question now emerging among Africa's educated elite is whether the ideological underpinnings of Africa's post-independence era is sufficient for securing Africa's future.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY

While African theology has significant links with earlier missionary thinking on "indigenization", in its essential characteristics and dynamics the movement is best construed as a phenomenon of modern African intellectual life. Studies of modern Africa concur that the central motifs of its intellectual life have revolved for more than a century around the one formative experience common to almost all parts of the continent, namely Africa's traumatic encounter with the West and its multifaceted response and reaction to that encounter (Bujo 1990, Magesa 2004, Antonio 2006). Cold-war era African theology whether it be "inculturational" or "liberational" proceed out of the recognition of Africa's massive victimization and exploitation. The imposition of colonial rule over most of the continent by the end of the nineteenth century meant for Africa a deprivation not only in political control but also in fundamental self-understanding.

Africa's intellectual life in the post-independence period has been representative of the preoccupations, commitments, anxieties and values of this new educated class. At the material level the new order sought above all for African "development," for a rapid modernization conceived largely along western lines, in order to withstand and supersede western economic and political dominance on the continent. At the ideological level the new order sought by every means to assert an African identity over against the west, while affirming its own identification with Africa's traditional heritage, in order to contest and overcome western intellectual hegemony in Africa (Walls 1980: 212). And thus

the issue of African authenticity and self-reliance, the issue of African identity and selfhood, in combination with a comprehensive critique of the west and its role in Africa, has functioned as the principal dynamic of Africa's intellectual life in almost all fields of learning and expression, including theology, in the latter part of the twentieth century (Appiah-Kubi & Torres 1979).

If a critical identity question functions at the heart of modern African intellectual life, then African Christianity has found itself faced with a doubly-critical identity question. African political nationalism refused to differentiate between the coming of colonialism and the coming of Christianity to the continent; it became axiomatic to treat the two as one. Modern African consciousness therefore perceived African Christianity as an alien western importation. For an African to become a Christian was to step into a world of spiritual amnesia whereby everything in the African past was to be jettisoned to make way for their newly found faith in Christ, which was firmly hinged on to a European worldview (Idowu 1965, Mulago 1965). Underlying the missionary approach were evolutionary and racial theories that had come to permeate Western thinking and which saw African culture as inferior and in need of the contribution of the West (Bediako 1992). Thus educated African Christians at the commencement of the independence era found themselves encumbered with a problematic identity. What could it possibly mean to be an African Christian? In what sense at all could "African Christianity" be construed as legitimately African? Hence the agenda of the African Christian came to embrace not only Africa's political and intellectual release from western dominance, but also African Christianity's release from western missionary dominance.

And if an affirmation of Africa's traditional heritage had become a central function of African intellectual life, then a fresh appraisal of Africa's religious heritage was also essential. Only by these means could the pressing demands of African Christian identity begin to be addressed and an acceptably authentic African theology be achieved (Bediako 1992). According to Bediako (1992) this was the key task of African theology. Inculturation was the awakening of African consciousness and identity that invited intellectual dialogue and a liturgical practice relevant to the African ideas as well as the development of ethical perspectives consistent with African values. The quest for African theology was to be coupled with cultural continuity and its theologies had to bear the distinctive stamp of mature African thinking and reflection (Fashole-Luke 1975:267). Thus evolved, at first hesitantly but increasingly with assertive confidence, the twin foci of the earliest movement, namely, first the attempt at a more responsible theological apprehension of African traditional culture – and especially of Africa's indigenous religions, combined with secondly a sustained critique of the western impact on Africa – and not least of the western missionary role in Africa. For all its strengths, however, inculturation as a cultural recovery project reflected a static and often romanticist view of "culture" failing to recognize the concept's inherent hybridity and trans-national complexity (Antonio 2006, Bayart 2005). Critics like Jean-Marc Ela (1986) took inculturation theologians to task for being more concerned with reconciling their own bifurcated identities as Western-educated African elites than with grappling with common realities of hunger, poverty and violence.

SOURCES OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY

The diversity of the Christian community in Africa and of its theological practioners has produced numerous divergent approaches to African theology. This in turn has makes the description and assessment that much more challenging. By and large, African theologians can be divided in two groups, known as the "old guard" (including well-known theologians like E W Fashole-Luke, Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, Itumeleng Mosala and Harry Sawyerr) and the "new guard" (including Eboussi Boulaga, Jean-Marc Ela, Ambrose Moyo, Kwame Bediako and Mercy Oduyoye) (Rogers 1994:245-246). Most African theologians involve themselves, to a greater or lesser extent with liberation issues and the postcolonial search for what is typical of African religion, and for an African intellectual self-definition. As can be expected, their theologies are dynamic, especially those of younger theologians who have more exposure to postcolonial conditions. As Sarpong (1991:228) points out, an African may pursue a particular course or act in a certain pattern for twenty years or more, and just when the Westerner concludes that he will continue to do so for the rest of his life, the African suddenly breaks the pattern.

Old guard theologians took Western Christian theology, developed it on African lines and called it "indigenization" or "inculturation." African traditional values and experiences became a passive partner, subordinate to a presumably superior Western theology. They practiced a Western form of hermeneutics which did not suit or serve the African context. The accent is on the Bible as the basic source for an African Christian theology. Fashole-Luke, while favouring African Traditional Religion (ATR) as a source of spirituality for the African people, warns against the notion that ATR is a preparation for the gospel (Rogers 1994:247). Mbiti's (1970, 1971) approach is to take biblical themes, compare

them with the African worldview and culture and discuss whether they can be apprehended by Africans. African concepts like time and history, for example cannot according to him, express the biblical understanding of eschatology. The African worldview is cyclic and the rhythm of nature ensures that the world will never come to an end.

The new guard theologians rejected the indigenization process, affirming African traditional values and eschewing what they called Western bourgeois values. For them African hermeneutics is predominantly concerned with reconstructing African theology independent of Western theological influence. The charge has been that African theologians have fundamentally misrepresenting African religions by a habit of screening and "baptizing" the data in order to project a traditional religion that is compatible with Christianity. ATRs are the wellspring of African customs, narratives, symbols and rites, hence indispensable for developing an African theology and hermeneutics. ATRs' worldview, their concepts of God, nature, the ancestors, community life, medicine and healing, the past and future are the filter through which traditional Christian doctrines about God and human beings, Christ and sin, eschatology and like are reinterpreted. Their primary work was produced in the 1980s in response to the call for liberation in South African religious circles. Ogku Kalu and Manas Buthelezi were calling on scholars to interpret the Bible from a liberation hermeneutic perspective (du Toit 2009:35). Theologians like Jean-Marc Ela, Mercy Oduyoye, Eboussi Boulage and Ambrose Moyo supported this approach. Eboussi Boulage distrusted the name "African Christianity" because it symbolizes African acceptance of Western domination of Africa on the social, political, economic and scientific levels. He still accepts the bible as part of Christianity from an African perspective and favours an 'aesthetic

Christianity' that responds to biblical themes of a universal nature. On the other hand, Mercy Oduyoye stressed that Christianity in Africa must be constructed from the vantage point of the "underside of history." Moyo called for dialogue between Christianity and ATR. The African Independent Churches (AIC) represents the group in which Christianity and the ATRs have come to be integrated. In Southern Africa the AICs have resolved the dualism between Western-orientated Christianity and African traditional culture and religion and have been successful in coming to grips with their identity. Rogers (1994:258-260) concludes that while the old-guard theologians were reluctant to enter the political arena, the new guard is strongly committed to a hermeneutic that responds to oppressive regimes wherever and whenever they occur. The old guard was open to indigenization whereas the new guard style is confrontational. The old guard saw the ATR as *praeparatio evangelica* (Mbiti 1969, Bediako 1992) whereas the new guard considers it a religion in its own right. However old-and-new guard theologians alike feel an African perspective on the Bible is essential to buttress a living theology appropriate to African Christian experience. ATR is considered a worthy source for understanding African spirituality.

PARADIGMS OF POST-COLONIAL AFRICAN THEOLOGY

By the early 1970s a separate theological movement had made its appearance on the continent. The "Black Theology" movement of South Africa (distinct from the North America movement of the same name), sought theological resources for investing South African blacks with a sense of human dignity in the face of apartheid, and for empowering them to achieve social justice and liberation. Per Frostin (1988:32) suggests five factors as representative of the liberation theology paradigm in African theology: (1) the

poor as the primary epistemological interlocutors for African theology; (2) the pursuit not with the question 'does God exist' but why does God allow idolatry, oppression?; (3) the understanding of the human reality as conflictual; (4) commitment to the analysis of what is going on, on the ground and the consequent use of social science rather than philosophy; (5) the insistence that commitment is the first act in theology. Among the most prominent early spokesmen were Manus Buthelezi, Allan Boesak, and Desmond Tutu. Almost immediately the relationship between Black Theology and African Theology became a point of vigorous debate (Carney 2010:551). In effect Black Theology contended that African Theology, immersed in its devotion to Africa's cultural past, had no effective word for Africa's future. They maintained that African theology encourages a cheap alliance between African culture and Christ. African Theology responded that Black theology seemed to lack any effective word for Africa's heart as they felt there was too much emphasis on political and economic liberation at the expense of the spiritual component (Speckman 2001:394). It is for this reason that Jean Marc Ela (1986, 1988) called for human liberation to counter the political culture that dehumanized Africans.

Because the South African movement accorded much more readily with theological trends in the larger ecumenical movement after Uppsala (1968), African Theology was co-opted into a larger agenda, principally achieved by asserting the complementarity of Black and African theologies. African theologians in general did not find it difficult to embrace the language of liberation theology if specifically referencing the ongoing western economic and political exploitation of Africa. Finally, even sympathizers like Desmond Tutu could critique liberation theology for failing to

recognize the interconnectedness of all humanity, victims and perpetrators alike (Battle 1997:150).

In response, theorists like South Africa's Charles Villa Vicencio (1992) and Kenya's Jesse Mugambi (2003) formulated a new model of reconstruction which invigorated African theology throughout the 1990s. For the reconstructionists, for example in South Africa the post-apartheid church should shift from a posture of prophetic resistance to one of political collaboration – helping to construct a modern, secular, multicultural South Africa enshrining the principles of democratic participation, human rights and economic justice for all. However this paradigm did not directly address how former enemies could share life together, preferring to focus on the procedural dimensions of nation-building (de Gruchy 2002: 200-201). The notion that the church might have a distinctive politics independent of the modern nation-state is never entertained (Gunda 2009:84-102).

While reconstruction has not disappeared from the academic scene, the 2000s has seen the emergence of a new paradigm of African theology: reconciliation. Integrating Christianity with local cultural traditions and claiming elements of liberation and reconstruction discourse, reconciliation theology has emerged as a dynamic stream of African theology (de Gruchy 2002). First the language of reconciliation is deeply rooted in religious discourse and stands at the heart of the Christian gospel. The paradigm recognizes post-modern parochialism to a critical synthesis of Christian revelation, African tradition and Western modernity. Politically, reconciliation theology has great influence, most famously in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and also post-conflict resolution efforts in countries ranging from Sierra Leone to Rwanda to Mozambique (Minow 1999, Oduyoye 2004). Most promi-

ment among these are Tutu's encouragement of interdependence and prophetic advocacy (Tutu 1997, 1999). He sees reconciliation as retaining a liberative dimension. Black consciousness and black theology had to affirm blackness as a part of God's creation and restore dignity to the African person before genuine inter-racial reconciliation could be possible in South Africa. The key shift from liberation to reconciliation comes in the way the enemy is viewed, now as "God's child." Tutu (1999) reminds us that reconciliation theology retains a prophetic or liberative dimension, helping the church maintain critical distance from the state. The criticism is however that it creates an impression of a rushed, even forced and superficial notion of forgiveness (Maluleke 2000).

The last few decades have seen feminist theology come of age with the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women theologians that takes gender, the experiences of women and injustice as important starting points for theology (Oduyoye 2004). Women contend that ethics constructed by male scholars do not go deep enough and dismantle both Christian and African values, beliefs and structures which are life threatening to women. To a large extent, African theology and liberation theology have been uncritical of cultural values that approximate sexism in the church and society. It appears as though the men assumed that to attack Western imposed values and structures will be enough to transform African communities (Njoroge 2000:124). In the current dispensation, the debate on sexuality (Bongmba 2012:253) that trust African churches into the centre of one of the largest crises in Christendom and that raises serious ethical and human rights concerns proves that African religious scholarship can no longer shy away from the contentious topics.

THE FUTURE

The achievements of African intellectual endeavour in the decades since independence have been extraordinary. In multiple fields of enquiry and expression Africa has thrown off alien dominance and asserted its own energetic perspectives. For example, the emergence of an indigenous Christology has not come easily. The marks of an indigenous church are much more than the familiar three selfs: self-governing, self-supporting and self-governing. The most neglected "self" argues Hiebert is "self-theologizing" (1994:97). The central difficulty is that the Africans arrived late at the "Christological puzzle." In 1967 Mbiti had declared that "African concepts of Christology do not exist" (1967:51). By 2005 Tanzanian theologian Charles Nyamiti declared that "Christology is the subject which has been most developed in today's African theology" (2005:3). He conceptualizes Christ as ancestor through kinship relations and the philosophical category of vitalism (Nyamiti 2005).

At the same time, it also appears that the inherited frameworks, theological methods and metaphors are increasingly been seen as inadequate if not expired. Africa herself finds herself in a new place and its thinkers and leaders are desperately looking for new language and new frameworks. The African poor are pouring scorn at "liberation-rhetoric" regardless of the where it emanates because long after independence they remain poor if not poorer. In a sense, Africa both the geographical entity "Africa" and the "idea" in its Pan Africanist nation-state are all daily imploding before our puzzled faces. As this new century commences, the continent is increasingly gripped by a sense of disillusionment, of failed dreams and lost opportunities. And the notion has begun to take form, that whereas authenticity and self-reliance were essential in securing Africa's political and cultural independence in the 20th century,

these emphases are now proving themselves insufficient for preventing the marginalization of Africa within the emerging world order of the twenty-first century. As Gatwa suggests (2003:204) intellectual ostracism is part of the problem faced. Everything is deficient; there are not enough teachers and their qualifications are insufficient, libraries and research facilities are lacking (Gatwa 2003:204). All this consigns the few dozen students and a handful of teachers to such intellectual and cultural isolation and marginalization that they are unable to develop partnerships and exchanges with other universities-level institutions. Africa emergence as a major center of world Christianity is hostage to its marginalization in the new global order – academic marginalization being a corollary of economic insignificance.

As we know African identity is pluralistic, incorporating a multitude of languages and religions, lifestyles and customs, stories and rituals. Africa means many things. While not denigrating the importance of identity, the quest for African identity must be put into context. Africa's "identity crisis" is a matter of ascription. That is why VY Mudimbe speaks of the "invention of Africa" in his book *Invention of Africa: Gnosis philosophy and the order of knowledge* (1988). First the continent was considered to be primitive, superstitious and technologically underdeveloped. Then the colonist gave it an identity by Christianizing it. Still later it acquired a "freedom identity" in the post-colonial era. Nowadays the issue of identity has changed. It is seen as open, fluid and changeable as the metaphysical, philosophical, religious and economic system that once governed it change. Nonetheless pragmatic concerns remain dominant. Current identity appears to depend on what works in practice and that applies globally: democracy,

technology, human rights, etc. Africa cannot but conform to the trend.

The intellectual transition accents one of the principal challenges facing African Theology. The constructive contributions of the movement in its first four decades have been immense. And if African Theology is to have a sustainable future, it will also need to give greater heed to responsible criticism of its more characteristic limitations whether that be Africa's modern intellectual quest, or Africa's cultural context, or Africa's traditional religions, important as each of these may be. Within such a construal of the task, the issue of Christianity's correlation with its African context has been rightly taken as cardinal. But this ought to be simultaneously recognised as only half of the foundational theological question of African Christian existence. As African evangelicals (Kato 1975, Adeyemo 1979, Tiénou 1990) and others have argued, the equally essential issue for theological reflection is the correlation of African Christianity with its Christian heritage. The criticism has been the persistent inclination both to disregard appropriate thinking to syncretism and to neglect the theological task of nurturing an identity for African Christianity that is not only African but also in some way distinguishably Christian. It is not enough to ask - how can African Christianity become more authentically African? It must also persistently be asked how African Christianity may become ever more authentically Christian (Bowers 2001). Without the maintenance of such double-frame for defining appropriate theological reflection, both the realities of human nature and the history of Christianity suggest that theological reflection can arrive all too readily at an over-realized contextualization, where the essential identity, purpose, and value of African Christianity for Africa has been lost. As Tiénou (1990) and others have proposed, the nature of the enter-

prise requires that a defining matrix should be the present Christian community of Africa, with the full range of its needs and expectations, its requirements and preoccupations. Its parameters should be construed to encompass the theological reflection required by the life of the contemporary African Christian community, as that community seeks to fulfill its calling under God within its context (Bowers 2001). At the same time it has become clear that it is no longer possible for African theologians to pretend that the Bible or the Christian faith interprets itself and that things go wrong when people misrepresent the faith which is essentially "pure" and "good." The question of hermeneutics (Maleluke 2006) has been thrust to the fore and many African theological approaches have begun to take conscious responsibility for this important and complex task of hermeneutics, not only in relation to the Bible but also in relation to the social reality in which African Christians find themselves (Mosala 1989).

As seen above, we see the face of Africa as distressed but there is another face of Africa as a massively Christian continent and still growing (Bongmba 2012:3). Such indications seem to ground certain optimism not only from the fact that the Christian way is here to stay but also from the sense that the future of the church might perhaps be in Africa. Pentecostalism thrives because it taps into an innate African spirituality however its phenomenal success raises questions of the relevance of African religiosity for African problems.

African theology retains a unique role to play in acknowledging, valorizing, interpreting and enhancing agency of African Christians (Maluleke 2002) in their daily struggles against cultural, religious and economic forces of death which seek to marginalize them. All of the new proposals

for African theology, each in its own way, foreground the notion of Africans as agents. African Theology has a significant role to play in discussing and framing issues on how African faith traditions perform in the public sphere. The areas where theologians need to focus include a praxis-orientated reflection on poverty, diseases and illness. Violence on the continent is an issue: this includes domestic violence, police and state brutality as well as war and ongoing crimes against people. Research is needed on political theologies that explore the idea of nationhood, leadership and the challenges posed to society and its people like bribery and political corruption in all its forms (Bongmba 2012:252).

CONCLUSION

The future of African theology is dynamic since the Christian community in Africa is so vibrant and prolific that an ongoing life, including theological reflection, is inevitable. Not only has the religious growth center shifted from North to South, the southern growth point has also intriguing features. It is not a duplication of Western Christianity; it has a deep spiritual strength, it operates in an oral culture; it is free from Western metaphysical constraints; it offers pertinent critique of Western culture and managing to relate traditional religious ideas with those imported into Africa in interesting ways. At the same time the agency of African Christians and the African poor is being rediscovered, explored and respectfully interpreted.

Thus it can be said in the words of Maluleke that "the old is dying in Africa, the new has not yet been born" (2002:160). The emerging paradigm of African theology is in search for new theoretical tools and perspectives that will enable African theology to understand and account for the mythical, the socio-cultural and the popular in religion and society. The lived realities of Africa's vigorous Christian community in the decades ahead will implicitly require this, and if the present movement does not adjust to meet these requirements, a new movement of African Christian reflection may supersede it, with inner dynamics more authentically

tuned to contemporary African Christian realities and expectations.

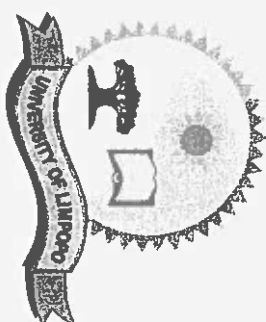
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