

A critical dialogue with Gabriel Molehe Setiloane: the unfinished business on the African divinity question

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Abstract

Gabriel Molehe Setiloane engaged and challenged the Western theological discourse on the structure and function of divinity. Most of his published dialogues pushed for the importance of an African theological discourse. Some of Setiloane's sensitive, but also critical, expressions made by include statements such as, *Motho ke Modimo* ("a human being is God/divine"). According to Setiloane there is a need to have a comprehensive understanding of divinity in African Theology encompassing all – the *living* and the *dead*. In this regard, Setiloane attempted to develop what he called the "African Divinity discourse" encompassing areas of life such as ethics and morality in secular contexts, family life, and civil authority, "riches and poverties" and the land question, crime, leadership styles, the functioning of the corporate sector in terms of *ubuntu* and bio-centric ethics. For more than 30 years, Setiloane dialogued critically with the then proponents of Black Theology and Liberation Theology, holding the firm view that African Divinity derives from African culture and Black and Liberation Theology from a form of Western Christianity. His main points are that (i) for African people, African Divinity is primary to their life and death experience; and (ii) if one has to confront the fact that many African people are Christian, they bring a much more elevated and encompassing understanding of divinity to Christianity, ultimately enriching it. For Setiloane, Black and Liberation Theology – as is currently acknowledged – were contextual phenomena, necessitated by the contingent challenges of having to advance the dignity of oppressed African people on the basis of race and the struggle for political freedom in the context of an oppressive political and ideological regime. According to Gabriel Setiloane, such movements were necessary at the time, but the question of African Divinity transcends them. This article aims to re-open a dialogue with a voice that has been sidetracked by the past and current (South) African theological systems and structures. Published and unpublished works of Setiloane will be included in this dialogue as well as recorded formal interviews and informal conversations. The author was privileged to have been entrusted with unpublished articles by the late Professor Setiloane. These unpublished articles are in the process of being published under the title *African Perspectives*, as instructed by the late Professor Setiloane.

Introduction

GC Oosthuizen (1976) once asserted strongly that the distinction between *Africanisation* and Black Theology is superficial as both are parts of a single process. In this process a black person, argues Oosthuizen, wishes to emphasise his or her identity as a person and a human being created in the image of God, whom he or she wishes to approach in his or her own sensitive manner. For certain this debate on the distinction, as pertaining amongst others to forms and structure, content and function, remains classical. Gabriel Molehe Setiloane always used to be in this contest – arguing fiercely about the place and function of African Theology. In fact, as early as the 1970s, Setiloane wrestled with this tension, be it creatively or not. It should be stressed that Setiloane used to be part of the black *theologisation* process until he began to do serious research and reflections on what he called a distinct feature of African Theology. In 1971, Setiloane battled with the definition of black theology as a term "used in reference to the whole area of theological thinking by the Black Man in the world. It is negatively inspired by the fact that in the past, it is felt, theologians have been insensitive to, and neglectful of certain experiences of mankind in our life together on this planet".² Setiloane even challenged the notion that the black theology enterprise began in United States of America. In a special article entitled "Black Theology: A Black theologian from South Africa explains what it is all about" Setiloane traces

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² Informal discussions with GM Setiloane – Kroonstad, 2001.

phases of interpretation and engagement in the USA – citing specifically that, “My own point of view is that Black Theology, as I have tried to define ... did not begin in the United States. Indeed our American brothers with TV cameras all around, mass media and communication gadgets about, and news-worthiness of their electrically charged situation, have stolen our thunder and helped to make Black Theology, even as all the cause of the Black Man, famous.”³

Since his inception of the first Religious Studies Department at the University of Botswana in the late 1960s, it was Setiloane’s aim to develop African religion and culture in terms of the contemporary challenges of his time. From within African religious consciousness, Setiloane’s ambition was to academically develop its spirituality and morality into the public sphere, into governance and into South Africa’s corporate systems and institutions. On the one hand, the fact that African religion and culture function in these spheres is a *sine qua non* for all Africans. According to Setiloane, every African person carries this spirituality and morality⁴ into his or her workplace every day of their lives. It is present in their activities, their labour, their communication and interaction with fellow people – whether kin, customers, or strangers.⁵ On the other hand, as he strongly argued, this is not recognised nor appreciated by those who are not from African descent. This, together with some other contradictions – dating from the colonial and apartheid periods – muddy the waters from the various sides in virtually every encounter we as South Africans engage in on virtually a daily basis, be that in the office, in conferences, across negotiation tables or even in the kitchens and gardens of our country. Setiloane’s primary conviction was to develop African sensibility so that it may confront modernising and, today, the corporate and the globalised world. On the one hand, he saw that this had to be done so that Africans could engage and compete within the complexities of this world from within their own religious and cultural assumptions. On the other hand, no development would be possible if this was not done – Africa would remain alienated from both its religious and cultural roots and from the world’s racing along its technical and capitalist route. Since Western Christianity in its various forms are dominant in South Africa, Setiloane had to confront this reality and had to state his views in terms of this reality.

This project – developing African religion and culture in terms of the contemporary challenges of his time – has been his life-long ambition, but unfortunately was thwarted on many occasions, also at the University of Cape Town where he accepted a position as associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies.

This article aims to represent some of Setiloane’s basic thoughts and how he developed them into the arenas of theology on African Divinity. This complex cannot be isolated or compartmentalised. For Setiloane, African people function – even as they have had to do this in the most detrimental of circumstances – as whole human beings, where the spiritual and real are not separated one from the other, but are intricately and inextricably intertwined. Furthermore, the presentation wishes that the basic pointers established by Setiloane in his career may serve as signposts for the next generation to build upon and develop further. Amongst many others, his contributions serve as one part of the bigger puzzle to engage current realities – both local and global – in an academic fashion, to do this in a responsible and responsive manner, and to do so from within the indicatives of the African religious and cultural heritage – specifically the area of African Divinity.

Gabriel Molehe Setiloane: a brief introduction

Setiloane linked his place in the African Theology discourse to his deep concern in the area of Church and Society or, more appropriately, Religion and Society. He traces this back to his education and upbringing in the fields of African Studies, viz. Social Anthropology, Ethnic History of Africa, and what used to be called Native Law, and Native Administration. This plus his reading of English Literature and its history in his high school and undergraduate days were the genesis of this concern. It lay behind the changing in his B.A. studies, from an intended study of law to the preparation of ordination through the study of theology. Once questioned by his friends about this sudden change he responded as follows: “I was not satisfied with being an ordinary lawyer, but was called to be an ‘Advocate for God’”. He recalled that William Temple’s *Christianity and Social Order*, prescribed as reading for a term paper while he was in theological training at Fort Hare in 1952, brought to the surface in him “what had, before then, been more institution [*sic*] and a vague undefined feeling”. It confirmed the dissatisfaction that had been left in his mind and his soul by the study of the “Native Policies” of the various colonial powers ruling over portions of the African continent. Thus, the burden of his speaking, preaching, writing and even his understanding of the Bible have been under this

³ Informal discussions with GM Setiloane - Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001.

⁴ Here, the *Motho ke Modimo* concept was developed.

⁵ Meaning that a human being is intrinsically religious.

influence. Of the four Gospels that of Luke, with its concern for the non-Jew and less privileged, and its emphasis of Christianity as a “way of life” (Chapter 7:1ff) spoke more to his need.

At Union Theological Seminary, New York, where he studied for one year, he was attracted more to John C. Bennett in his Church and Society course on *The Application of Christian Social Ethics* and Bill Webber’s *Church and Community Seminar* than Reinhold Niebuhr, nor Paul Tillich, both of whom he claims he could not understand. At the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Institute, Chateau de Bossey, Celigny, in the Graduate Course, he was fascinated by the story of the Confessing Church in Germany during the Nazi Regime, obtained at first hand from his fellow students and some professors. He then, , with great care and application, read Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Cost of discipleship*, which had been presented to him by a Canadian friend at an ecumenical work camp in the USA.

When he returned to South Africa, his first public utterance other than as circuit minister of the New Goldfields Circuit in the then Orange Free State, was in October 1956 at a Conference of the Interdenominational African Ministers’ Association of South Africa (IDAMASA, then IDAMF) . The agenda of the ten day conference was to consider all the aspects (legal, political, social, religious, etc.) and the implications of the report of the Government Commission on *Territorial Apartheid*, commonly called the *Tomlinson Report of 1956* for the African Community. Bishop (then Canon) A. Zulu had read a paper on the “Church’s View” of the measures and the policies advocated by the report. Setiloane was called upon to comment and he could not resist on drawing a parallel, even at that early stage, between the South African situation and that of Germany during the Third Reich. This comment was reported in *The World*, a Johannesburg bi-weekly paper of wide circulation and *The Drum*, also of Johannesburg, a magazine for African Readership (see the October, 1956 numbers). The crux of what he said then was that “the Church should not stand by and behold justice, equity and decency flouted and human dignity abrogated.” He quoted Bonhoeffer: “I cannot stand by and allow a reckless driver on a public highway threatening the safety of innocent people.” As the General Secretary of the Methodist Youth Department, he had the opportunity to sit for six years on the Conference of the Methodist Church of South Africa.

All through these years, 1957-1962, the African section strove to persuade that body that the Church’s calling in South Africa is to assist South Africans in living a life that is above the discrimination and racial prejudices of the society in which it found itself. Quite understandably, he became deeply involved in carrying out the decisions of an African caucus, pressing for the appointment of an African President following the 1958 Conference, as an earnest demonstration of commitment to the “one and multi-racial Church”. The caucus charged Setiloane with the duty of acquainting the Rev. Seth M. Mokitimi with the fact about him being their selected candidate, and to persuade him of the wisdom of accepting it as God’s calling to service. He (Setiloane) battled in argument with Seth Mokitimi in his Mission House home at Osborn Mission in the Transkei until the early hours of the morning. Great has been his agony, afterwards, to see what Seth Mokitimi had to suffer as a result of his persuasion that day. This step brought to the surface, what Setiloane calls all the racist prejudice of the white side of the Church. He mentioned as follows: “Many of us were called names: ‘Communists’, ‘Fellow Travellers’, ‘Rabble-rousers’, etc., and our call to the Christian ministry was interpreted as opportunism and a means to further our political ambitions.” It was not until 1964, after a struggle lasting for six years, that the Methodist Church of South Africa appointed Seth Mokitimi as its first Black President. By then, Setiloane had already left the Youth Department and was resident in Zambia, seconded by his Church to the All Africa Conference of Churches as its Secretary of the Commission on Youth. However, before leaving South Africa he had successfully proposed a motion at the Annual Conference of 1961 in Johannesburg, to the effect that the Methodist Church desist making statements on “Social and political questions,” piously declaiming the evils of Government policy when it was itself, in fact, practicing similar policies. He also addressed a Conference at a “Multiracial” Youth Rally of the Durban Conference, in 1962 on *The Christian citizen in South Africa today*. By this time it had become his conviction that the phrase, so very popular then: *The prophetic mission of the church*, meant not

... standing on the hill-top and pontificating against the evils of society and its institutions, but an involvement and participation in the concerns and its life; being soiled, dirtied, and even called names in the process of bringing about change.⁶

Setiloane’s views on African Theology

⁶ Setiloane-Masoga interviews – Kroonstad, 2002.

Setiloane impressed that:

... native intuition, confirmed by my African Studies, has convinced me that there is an inadequate understanding of the forces and principles, mainly religious, but often dismissed as superstition by early missionaries, anthropologists and the Church, that lie behind African ideas about Man, Society and Divinity (See the Kampala Address)⁷. African Traditional Society as I see it, (and I draw mainly from my people, the Southern Bantu, in particular, the Sotho-Tswana) had a deeper and more adequate sensitivity and perception of the divine at work in human relationship, society and nature at large (see Smith 1923:3).

It is to these sensitivities, these “elements of an earlier cult” (Smith) that Setiloane traced his own and his “peoples’ aching dissatisfaction with Christianity in practice today. It seems very inadequate and appears in many ways ‘a sham’”. He first used this expression in 1959 at the conference referred to above; see *The Rand Daily Mail*, Johannesburg, December 1959).

His ideas and ultimately the development of African Theology discourse developed from his contact with the World Church through the W.C.C and its Conferences and its Assemblies, discussions and consultations on all manner of subjects and issues (New Delhi, 1961, Salonica, 1959, Geneva, 1966, Mindolo, 1964 on Racism and Uppsala, 1968), together with study abroad and visits, in the USA, Europe and, by then, Great Britain.

The impression he had was that Western Christianity has lost the *sensitivity*, in matters of religion, “of the African traditional scene”⁸. This sensitivity of humanity in relation to divinity at work in all corners of society and its relationships - the preferred expression by Setiloane is the *totality of life* - lies at the heart of African attitudes to religion. Interestingly enough, Setiloane regarded the latter to be basic to the *kerugma*. Its loss to Western Christianity, Setiloane, ascribed it to Greek and Roman philosophical influences on Christian thought development over centuries. As he argues, these influences were already seen at work in the Biblical material, eg how much was Paul influenced by the Stoa or how much of Gnosticism is detectable in the Johannine writings, and so forth? In this regard, Setiloane points out that, over the ages, as a result of this influence, Christianity and Christian theology have emphasised *concept*, the cerebral acceptance more than the pragmatic application. Christianity has thus been passed down as a body of concepts (e.g. the Creeds) to be given consensus to, rather than as a *way of life*, a dynamic force to being. All these convinced Setiloane to hold the firm view that African traditional ideas about humanity, society and the divinity at work in them (theology) may be much nearer the purposes and intentions of the *kerugma* than Western Christianity. This *native intuition* (Setiloane’s expression), confirmed by his engagement in African Studies, convinced him that there is an inadequate understanding of the forces and principles, mainly religious, but often dismissed as superstition by early missionaries, anthropologists and the Church, that lie behind African ideas about humanity, society and divinity. African traditional society, as Setiloane saw it (and he drew mainly from the Southern Bantu context, in particular, the Basotho and Batswana), had a deeper and more adequate sensitivity and perception of the divine at work in human relationships, society and nature at large. It is to these sensitivities, these *elements of an earlier cult* (Masoga), that he traced his own and his “peoples’ aching dissatisfaction with Christianity in practice today. It seems very inadequate and appears in many ways ‘a sham’”.

Setiloane attempted to define African Theology by using EW Smith’s foreword to Geoffrey Parrinder’s *West African religion*, where the hope is expressed that “someday Dr. Parrinder or someone equally competent will follow up this study of the pagan religion with a study of the actual religion of those Africans who in various degrees of reality have accepted Christianity”⁹. The key question from the mentioned publication that moved Setiloane is: Do preachers and teachers deliberately set themselves to relate the new religion to the old? The latter question made Setiloane to conclude that “this is exactly what African Theology attempts to do. It seeks to observe and express (teach and preach) the Christian message out of the reality of African being and experience over the ages. For this reason, it is a contextual theology. Its context is African-ness. It is also a ‘cultural’ theology, because it holds and thrives on the assumption that every people understand Reality, and therefore Divinity, and interpret it culturally”¹⁰.

Setiloane further defines African Theology as an attempt to understand the relation of God in Jesus Christ to the experience of the African world-view. Its challenge to the normally accepted, so-

⁷ Setiloane unpublished papers.

⁸ Setiloane-Masoga interviews, Kroonstad, 2002.

⁹ Setiloane-Masoga interviews, Kroonstad, 2001.

¹⁰ Setiloane-Masoga interviews, Kroonstad, 2002.

called ecumenical theology is that it clouds the issue of Christian Revelation, because it is in fact an understanding therefore, through the Western cultural world-view over the years, which is now imposed, by the claim of Christian orthodoxy, wherever the Christian message is welcome and accepted.

Historical sketch of development of African Theology

For Setiloane, the missionaries were the first to demonstrate an interest in the religiosity of the African people, which they experienced as a hurdle in their calling to transmit their message. The emergence of social anthropology as a field of study, which excited the curiosity of many of them (the missionaries) somewhat, diverted their observation that the phenomenon is a religious one. They, for a long time, would not accept it as *religion*. Hence their very informative studies, like WC Willoughby's *Nature worship and taboo* (Hartford Seminary Press, 1932) and the *Soul of the Bantu* (SCM, 1928), invariably appeared under *Ethnology* and not *Religion* in public libraries. To this day, much material on the religious practices of the Africans is hidden in missionaries' writings as *Biography* and *Travelogue* Backhouse, for instance *A narrative of a visit to Mauritius and South Africa* (H Adams, London 1844), JT Brown, *Among the Bantu nomads* (Sealey Service, London 1926) etc. The most useful informative material are the records of the very early missionaries, which in fact laid down the foundation for the study of social anthropology, e.g. Robert Moffat's *Missionaries labours and scenes in South Africa*, (J Snow, London, 1842), Eugene Casalis's *The Basutos* (J Nisbert, London 1865), G Mackenzie's *Ten years North of the Orange River* (Edinburgh, 1871) and Samuel Broadbent's *The introduction of Christianity among the Barolong tribes of South Africa* (WMH, London 1865).

According to Setiloane, the late 1920s was a very fertile period in developing literary records of the various aspects of African religious practice. Among others, WC Willoughby's book was published then. However, it is EW Smith who was the first to recognise the peculiar phenomenon in Africa among the South African people as *religion*, albeit a *religion* of the "lower races" based on the international Missionary Conference of Le Zoute, Belgium, 1926:

To one who is convinced of the working of the Eternal Spirit in the African's past the question presses home: How can I guide my people so that while becoming true disciples of Christ they may remain true Africans? (The Christian Mission in Africa, Edinburgh House, London 1926).

For this development of accepting the so-called "customs" and "practices" of the African people before the advent of Christianity as worthy of study as an expression of religion, credit goes to the Kennedy School of Missions, Hartford, USA. It set up a Chair of African Missions to which distinguished missionaries from Africa, like WC Willoughby were attracted. EW Smith himself spent some time there. It is out of this period of reflection they both have spent there that current mission studies owe some of their works, *The Golden School* (CMS, 1927), *The Shrine of a people's Soul* (SCM, 1929) and much later *African Ideas of God* (London 1950).

In Francophone Africa the corresponding personality is Fr. Placide Tempels, whose *Bantu philosophy* (Paris, 1950) first appeared in French. The misleading title, argues Setiloane, is the result of the author's Thomistic background in which religion wins approbation only as far as it can be philosophically accounted for and analysed.

Early African participation in the development of African Christian expression

Setiloane argues that some of the early agents of mission were afforded the opportunity to study abroad. Abroad, they must have been challenged greatly to look at the faith. Two valuable contributions from Africans of the church of Scotland Mission, from this time are Soga's *The Ama Xhosa: life and custom* (Lovedale Press, 1931) and JB Danquaah's *The Akan doctrine of God* (London 1944). In addition to these books, SM Molema's *The Bantu: past and present* (W Green, Edinburgh, 1920) and Soga's *The South Eastern Bantu* are more ethnographical, and J Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, although a much later work, follows the same line. The decade from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s is rather barren in literature. It may well be because it was then that the IMC was making contact with Africa after the Indian Tambaran Conference of 1936. Also, because of the appearance of Ethiopianism, much thinking and debate was being given to the following question: *What shall be the nature of the church in Africa?* B Ross and E Jacottet's running correspondence in "The Christian Express" (SA) and Leas' "The Separatist Church Movement in South Africa" (WM MS, 1027) are examples. The appearance of Bengt Sundkler's *Bantu prophets in South Africa* (Edinburgh Press,

1948) was seen as epoch-making because it was more of a sociological study than a *religio-*ecclesiastical one. For Setiloane, the latter publication caused the harm to divert attention from the development of the study of the religions of Africa, seriously examining the content of African religiosity from a theological perspective, for which EW Smith and WC Willoughby had laid the foundation. On the West Coast, however, G Parrinder was devotedly prodding along and, at about the same time as Sundkler, published *West Africa Religion* (London 1949), which carried on the tradition of a sympathetic Christian Missionary appraisal. However, it was left to John V Taylor's *Primal vision* (SCM, 1963) to reinstate the subject of African religiosity in the church and mission circles. *Primal vision* coincided with the great spiritual awakening, which spread over the African continent at the time when Senghor's *Negritude* was beginning to penetrate the scene, and the assertion of African personality permeated all crevices of social and political life, fanning the fire of African Nationalism against colonialism.

The witness of the insider

Setiloane maintains that, for durability of material, John V Taylor's book is not comparable to Geoffrey Parrinder's works. Its contribution lies in its provocativeness and the fact that it is an uninhibited appreciation of indigenous African spirituality by a missionary of no mean standing in scholarship. This book, and Parrinder's works, prepared the ground for Bolaji Idowu's *Oludumara's God in Yoruba Belief* (SCM, 1962), which established Bolaji Idowu as the "Father of the African Theology". His (Idowu) books, *Toward an Indigenous Church* (London 1965) and *African traditional religion: a definition* (SCM Press, 1973), argues Setiloane, err too much in the area of ecclesiastical and theological polemic. Following in the steps of Parrinder at the University of Ibadan, Idowu occupied the first Chair in the Study of African Religions in Africa. Makerere, Uganda followed with John Mbiti and his *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1969) and *Concepts of God in Africa* (SPCK, 1970). At about the same time in Francophone Africa, Msgr. Vincent Mulago was taking further Placide Tempels' insights of "*Force Vitale*" into a passionate and comprehensive interpretation of the "participation in a common life" among the Bashi people as the main, if not the only, basis of all their community, life and its institutions in *Un visage africain du christianisme* (Paris, 1965). In Bolaji Idowu, Vincent Mulago and John Mbiti African Christian scholars were for the first time doing what EW Smith had hoped would be done, which is attempting to establish African traditional religion as legitimate *preparatio evangelica*. Their work was received with enthusiasm by Christian Africa, which could not help being infected with the feeling of *Negritude* and *African personality*, and inspired by *African Nationalism*, all of which were then at their peaks. Then the All Africa Conference of Churches, Kampala, 1963, provided a welcome vehicle for future development. Already at its inaugural Assembly, the Commission on Theological Study headed the list of five Commissions. Its first activity was the Consultation of African Theologians hosted by Idowu at Ibadan in 1966. The outcome was *Biblical revelation and African beliefs*, edited by Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, 1969. The French title expresses best its aims and purpose: *Pour une theologie Africains* (Editions CLE, Yaoundé, 1978).

By then, the field was open for all and sundry. African Theology was discussed all over the continent. Harry Sawyer and Fashule-Luke of Sierra Leone, Seth Nomenyo of Togo and others made their input. Interpreters of the African understanding of Christianity made their appearance all over the continent, and the subject became material for senior theological studies in African universities and abroad. By the mid-1970s, African Theology was so established that it became the theme of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission in Accra, Ghana, in 1973. In Francophone Africa, in addition to Vincent Mulago, prominent figures were Fr. Englebrect Mveng of Cameroon, Rev. Seth Nomenyo of Togo and much later Fr. Ngindu Mushete of Zaire, who continued Vincent Mulago's work at the Centre d'Etudes des Religion Africaines Universite Lovanium, Kinshasa.

According to Setiloane, South Africa was somewhat left behind in this dialogue between African cultural heritage and Christianity. This was mainly because the socio-political situation of white domination jettisoned all African theological effort to be inclined to see a ray of the light of liberation in and through Black Theology. Nevertheless, strident voices, like that of Solomon Lediga in *A relevant theology in Africa*" (Edited by HJ Becken, Durban 1973), as well as Setiloane's *The selfhood of the Church* (AACC Assembly, Kampala 1963), were heard here and there.

Principal themes of African Theology

Setiloane mentions three key themes of African Theology.

- *Umuntu* – humanity and ancestors

According to Setiloane, to an outsider the most abrasive and challenging element in African Theology is its teaching on the ancestors. No African Theology glosses lightly over it. They all defend it even to the extent of finding some new names to explain it to foreigners, for instance “the living dead” (Mbiti). Actually, the concept of “ancestors” is bound together with the African understanding of *umuntu-motho*, which is its estimate of the human person (man). This understanding is embedded in the view that the human person is incorruptible and persists after corporeal death. The belief that the human person shares in Divinity is much more pronounced and practically acknowledged in African Theology than in Western Theology, which seems to be contrasted to shy away from it as reminiscent of *humanism*, a “heresy” in the last century in the West. Africans simply declare *Motho ke Modimo* – a human person is something sacred or even divine, in other words the human participates in Divinity without necessarily claiming equality with it.

From African Traditional Religion, declares Setiloane, African Theology views the human being *umuntu-motho*, as dynamic. The human is “*force vitale*” (Tempels); as much possessing *serithi-isithunzi*, a magnetic energy, which makes it an entity in “vital participation” (Mulango) along with similar entities, which may be human or not. That this human “vital force”, *serithi-isithunzi*, is derived from the all-pervasive, original, determining Vital Force, Modimo, the Source of Being, accounts for human indestructibility and therefore, continuation in “vital participation” as Ancestors after corporeal death. This continued life of the human after death is not for its own sake, but for the continued sustenance of the physically living as well as for ethical-moral purposes of ensuring righteous dealing between humans as well as between humans and other beings in nature, animate as well as inanimate. Ancestors are “the guardians of the morality” (Daryl Forde) of the group, community in family, tribe or nation. They discharge this responsibility with excellence and effect because they are *Badimo, Vadamu, Wa-zinu* (Swahili) literally “the people of Modimo (Divinity) and transmitters of Modimo’s essence, energy, Vital Force” (Sawyer’s *God ancestor or creator*, London, 1970; Setiloane, 1976).

- Community

For Setiloane African Theology makes much of community. A human person’s worth inheres in and is rooted in belonging: *I belong therefore I am* (Mbiti). Being is belonging, and nothing that is does not belong. In the end all belong to Mong (Sotho) Tsoci (Nupe) the Owner. This belonging is dynamic as being interactions with other beings in and with the cosmos. “For the Bantu (as with other Africans) beings maintain an intimate relationships with one another” (Mulago). The living strengthen their dead by offering them *service (inkonzo – Nguni, tirelo –Tswana)*; the departed in turn exert a real vital influence on the living and on their destiny. The visible world is one with the invisible; there is no break between. Therefore, at any one time any community is more than the sum total of the physical elements that composes it. Community, therefore, is a cauldron, an interlocking circuit in which the members, not only human, exist in interdependence on one another.

Because Africans bring with them this kind of rich sense of community into the ecumenical concourse, often their expectations and demands from others whom they associate with, especially in the Christian Church where much is made of *koinonia* as the desired goal, can be and have been rather strenuous. It could result in (in fact has done so, for instance in the indigenous Church movement) disenchantment with what is presented as Christian forms. The ecumenical Christian community could deepen its own understanding immensely if it could recognise in this African understanding a sample of what Early Christianity envisaged (Acts).

- The concept or image of God

The unique contribution of the African Theology, argues Setiloane, lies in its insistence that Divinity-Modimo is *Force Vitale*. Arriving on the scene at the height of the *Honest to God-God is Dead* debate; African Theology diffused that line of thinking, which inevitably came from the historical development of Western Christian Theology. African Theology contributes a sense of the presence, the “here-ness” of God, in spite of God’s *supremacy* and *otherness*, because the God the African have associated with, missionary teaching had to contest with numerous concepts of deities and divinities from the traditional African background. Consequently, when African theologians themselves began to make the

comparison, they have emerged with a conviction that Western Christian concepts of Divinity are not adequate, but a diminution and devaluation of their inherited African concepts (Kibicho, C Gaba [Ghana], GM Setiloane). For instance, etymological and ethnographic research reveals the Basotho-Batswana concept or image of Divinity as of a Power, a Force, a Presence in the universe (EW Smith, Tempels) which interpenetrates, permeates all being (Setiloane, *dima*) that gives it form and life because it is inextricably part of all beings, in other words *participates* in all being (Mulago). This, therefore, renders religious experience inescapable and irresistible. Modimo-Divinity is in all and all is in Modimo. Therefore, life is a totality and there cannot be any line of differentiation between the so-called sacred and the so-called secular. This African Theology comes at Christianity from a monistic world view and claims to hear corroboration of this in the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament. In West African Religion, there exists among the various peoples a multiplicity of smaller divinities that need to be approached and worshipped on different occasions. This is not a universal African phenomenon. Of universal application, however, are the Ancestors, “who are very prominent in religious belief and practice” throughout the continent, “always near and normally attentive” (EW Smith) and the idea of a Supreme or Higher Deity above all the other divinities.

Behind African beliefs and actions, explains Setiloane, lies a fundamental experience, a feeling of the existence of “something” or “somebody” beyond oneself, a mysterious “power which cannot be seen and is not fully understood, but which is at work in the world” (McVeigh 1974).

Various regional names exist for this phenomenon. They all agree in the fact that they describe the same experience and reality. It is these names which, in the different places, the translators employed to denote the Biblical concept, God. Invariably the Deity the name described was placed far above and in control of the other deities who might belong to any particular people’s pantheon, hence its association with the Old Testament *Yahweh*.

While the names may differ from group to group, the qualities or attributes of this Supreme Deity overlap all over the continent: “They ascribe to Him the attributes of Almighty and Omnipresent; they believe He created the Universe” (Bosman 1905). Therefore God is known as “Creator, owner of breath and spirit, benefactor, merciful, living, Lord of glory, silent, but active, judge (the idea of retribution), King of the heavens” (Parrinder 1949), whose origins cannot be determined, who “interpenetrates and permeates all being; is Unknowable (an Enigma): the source of being” (Setiloane, 1976).

Where are we in African Theology?

As Setiloane has indicated earlier, the task of attempting to answer the above question is not only monstrous, but is one that no two minds would agree on. It has to be subjective, based on the experience the answerer has had on what conferences and consultations he or she has participated in on the subject.

Bangkok – 1972

For Setiloane the breakthrough, as far as impressing the traditional Western Orthodox Theological world was in Bangkok, 1972. As he explains:

It is true also, and for us perhaps shamefully so, that at Bangkok we made [*sic*] on the World Christian Theological thinking not so much because of the Africa Theology propounded by us there, but for the shock to the Ecumenical World that the idea of *Moratorium* excited. It is as we were defending the *Moratorium* stance that our African Theological point of view was expounded and excited curiosity. Particularly on the European continent, Bangkok excited quite some thinking, and Seminars and Consultations on African Theology became the vogue at *Evangelische Akademie* and theologians like Goldweiser and Klauspeter Balser began to write on it.

It is the impact of the African Theological World which made Faith and Order Commission give it a place at its pre-Assembly Commission Meeting in Accra in 1974, which is *The Conference on giving account of the hope that is in us*. So far, Africa’s view had been represented in Church and Society, CCME, DFI and even international affairs, but never really as such at the Faith and Order level as Theologians of the World meet to determine and challenge the so-called Christian Orthodoxy. Bangkok challenged the understanding and application of the Christian Gospel Teaching Morality and Ethics. Nor was it the first time: It had been voiced on the Ecumenical platform (Geneva, 1966), Church and Society, and Uppsala (1968) heard it. But it had never come out so uniform and one voiced from one

quarter – Africa – which indicated that there was a uniform African preconditioning in Christian approach and outlook.

For Africans, what was striking at the Conference was the discovery of a unity of our presuppositions. Whatever our African regional or ecclesiastical confessional origins and professions: Francophone, Anglophone, West, East, Southern Africa, Catholic, Methodist, and Reformed.

Jos – 1975

The next milestone in this development was the *Conference on Christianity in Post-Colonial Africa* held in Jos, Nigeria, in August 1975. For Setiloane it was particularly exciting that in that hotchpotch of material were the views contained in the papers of John Kibicho of Nairobi, made previously in another context by Christian Gaba, and which I find I confirm from my research in Southern Africa, namely that in the translation of the African names for Supreme Being or Deity relating to Christianity there has been a devaluation (diminution, as Kibicho calls it) of the concept. This means that in my context Modimo the Supreme Deity of the Sotho-Tswana is in fact a much higher and much deeper concepts than Modimo as a Christian translation for God in the Bible, as in other Christian literature. At Jos representatives of the Western Theological world-view were scandalised by this assertion. Of course it was very startling and disconcerting to the superiority-complexed Western Christian Theology. Sotho-Tswana Modimo, according to Setiloane, Ngoni people's Nyambe, according to Gaba, and the Kikuyu people's Ngai, according to Kibicho, could never die. Because "It" has no human limitations and "It" is so big, incomprehensible, wide tremendous and weird!

"Die vierte dimension"

The topic Setiloane was specifically called upon to make a contribution on at Jos was "How indigenous traditional understanding of being persists in Christian communities in Africa today". The title of the presentation, according to Setiloane, was vague at this conference. He then decided to assess the place of the present African Theological activity (or revolution as others could have seen it) in the history of Christian development from the beginning. An article commissioned as post-Bangkok material by CWME on behalf of a Belgian RC group, never saw the light in WCC or Catholic circles. In his presentation, he maintained that African Theology offers a fourth dimension to Christianity. He looked at Christian history from the African perspective and pointed three dimensions or points of departure from the beginning. First is the dimension of Early Church, when theological foundations were laid by the Early Church Fathers and the Creeds developed. It was, of course, all very Hellenistic, with the Roman Empire offering a base. So it continues until Byzantine split (433 AD), when the Eastern Church went one way and the Western Church another. We then had two dimensions. His very strong cultural orientation to religion was considered suspicious that the basis of this split was cultural, Greek vs. Roman. And believed that one he will do research in Church history so that he could speak more authoritatively on this issue.

The third dimension came on to the Western Churches side with the Reformation. Here he saw the Reformation, a faction of the Renaissance, as a presentation of the Christian Gospel in indigenous Middle and Northern European orientation as against the orthodox Roman Catholic garb of Southern Europe, which had exercised cultural, political, intellectual and spiritual domination for centuries over the former. It was more the Germanic in Martin Luther seeking on behalf of himself and his people a Gospel that could satisfy, which kicked against Rome and her influence. No wonder the princes gave him support. But to show how down to earth it all was, even the peasants heard Martin Luther, and heard him clearer and louder than he wished to have been heard, hence the Peasant's Revolt. Indeed, when the Germans had set the ball in motion, the Nordic peoples and the Gaullic followed suit. There was never really all that much Theological Reformation in England and it is significant that John Calvin belonged to the Northern part of France bordering on Germany. Also is it not striking that most of France being ethnically Latin, rather than Germanic, is to this day much more Roman Catholic than Protestant? What I am saying is that the Reformation was a cultural revolution within the Christian Church. The dust of the Reformation settled and Christianity in Europe rolled on. Europe, especially Central Europe, became Protestant and this religious outlook became a cultural thing, a so-called civilisation.

It is this cultural Western Protestantism which gave rise to the Missionary Movement of the 18th century, and the Christianity that was preached to and assimilated by our fathers was this type. It was a repetition of the Missionizing of Central and Northern Europe, where the indigenous cultures of the Germanic, Gaullic and Nordic peoples were actually extirpated (even more than ours) by the Inquisition. Almost two centuries of this type of Christianity have passed on this continent.

Setiloane argued that African insight and interpretation are based on African-ness – the culture and orientation to which has never been done as much destruction as the Chauvinistic Western Christian point of view has often wanted Africans to believe.

This is the fourth dimension he spoke about! Thinking in this strain, Setiloane was very impressed by the similarity between the theological activities (or controversies) ranging in and around this continent since Bolaji Idowu of Nigeria published his *Olodumare* and *An indigenous Church in Africa*. He strongly asserted that Africans have sprung up from the East, West, South and North of this continent, where each expressed in his or her native dialect and tongue: “We can only be truly Christians as we are truly and fully Africans. Shed our African-ness to be Christian then we feel we are fake! Ever since the All Africa Christian Youth Assembly¹¹ fifteen years ago exactly how many times have we not been driven individually and together to declare with Martin Luther – ‘Here I stand. I can do no other’ ”.

Where are we content-wise?

Setiloane persistently asked the question: Where are we as regards the content of what we stand for so adamantly? In answering this question he sketched a number of developmental phases, ranging from the academic study with Ibadan and Makerere as leading centres in the 1970s. It is a pity that Bolaji Idowu’s book, *African traditional religion: a definition*, hit the printers so much later (1973). By then, John Mbiti had already filled up the hungry minds in Africa and abroad with his apologetic work, coupling African Religiosity with philosophy and much too simplistically drawing up similarities and agreements between traditional African understanding and the Christian Faith. At the same time there were very significant contributions being made, especially in Francophone Africa, by Monsignor Vincent Mulago of Kinshasa with his *Participation Vitale*¹² taking Placide Tempels’ *Force Vitale* idea to its logical and indigenous conclusion, and Fr. Englebert Mveng of the Cameroon who approached it all in the more pragmatic manner of finding African liturgical symbols. In this regard, the Anglophone Africans were also robbed of tasting the contributions of Pastor Seth Nomanyo of Togo who, as Theological Secretary of CEVA, pushed African Theological Challenges into the French-speaking Protestant World.¹³

Content-wise, Setiloane strongly voiced the following:

I believe we have now established the legitimacy of the African claim to a unique and different Theological point of view within the Ecumenical Christian Community because of their cultural, geographical, spiritual, social and temperamental background. We have not contributed a little to the modern acceptance in World Theological circles to the view that Theology can only be, and is done only, in context. Because Theology is a verbalisation of experience of the Divinity at work, difference in environment means different experiences of these One and all pervasive Divinity at work, and therefore different vibrations of these experiences. It has now become accepted even by the WCC – Faith and Order Commission that it is scandalously blasphemous to attempt to house all the experience of Divinity at work in the world under one Theological umbrella. As we made it clear here in Accra in 1974, we have found that umbrella very leaky.

The following two areas are considered to have been sufficiently covered, according to Setiloane:

¹¹ See the Study Guide based on this Conference: *What is it to us?* By Setiloane, Published by WSCF Geneva, 1963.

¹² A contribution by that name, in K.A. Dickson & P. Ellingworth eds. *Biblical revelation and African beliefs*, Lutherworth, London, 1969. However, M. Mulago and Cikala’s impact and unique contribution is best reflected in the French edition *Pour une Theologie Africaine*, Ed. Yaoundé, 1969.

¹³ Mveng’s and Nomenyo’s views were very forcefully expressed at the WCC Faith and Order Conference, Accra, 1974, and are prefaced in their contributions to the preparatory material for that conference (unpublished) 1974.

- African myths concerning the origin of things

Here Setiloane uses the Southern African context. The African myths concerning the origin of humanity and things made much more sense with all the knowledge man has required to date than the creation myths of Genesis,¹⁴ which, by the way, were myths (i.e. verbalisation of the experience) of a particular group of people and have become universalised by Christian teaching. Judaism is not guilty of this crime of universalising them.

- Human community

In these myths, which portray a human being as first seen in community, one finds, according to Setiloane, the seed of the deep African understanding of community. It is this instinctive feel for community which can be deemed to be behind our madness at Bangkok or at any point where Christianity does not do justice to it. He suggests as follows:

I suggest that it is this instinct for Community, which has made us AACC see no dichotomy between Christianity and Violence, which liberated and establishes a just and harmonious community. When you criticise Burgess Carr for seeing the Cross or its violence as ushering in an area of liberated men in a harmonious community, remember he is not speaking Western learned Theology, which he knows very well, but what he feels with his blood (guts American will say) as an African. We individuals have agreed all on this. Community comes before individuals or groups of individuals. And when we read the scriptures we find ourselves confirmed. We therefore find African Theological understanding [and] confirming Christian Biblical Teaching – not that I do not say Christian Theological Understanding, which we find adulterated at the points of the second and third dimensions (as treated above).

The next steps – an African Divinity

What Setiloane found throughout his research journey is that African Christians in fact Africanise the Christian Western God concept and thus raise it to the level of their concept of Modimo, which is much higher, as in the story at Lobatse:

So my sweet old lady Methodist Manyano woman informant at Lobatse says: “We have learnt nothing new about religion from the missionaries. All they have taught us is *tlhabologo* = Western civilisation and way of life”. But we are bringing something to Christianity: a view of Divinity much higher, deeper and all-pervasive. That is why we quarrel so much with our Christian brothers at Ecumenical gatherings. Our expectations from Christianity are different because we come with different presuppositions and different views of the overruling determining Divinity, which we all together profess to confess in the Christian fold.

If so, Setiloane concludes: “With our higher understanding of Divinity than Western Christian Theology why are we continuing in the Christian fold? I must confess that these days I even find an Ecumenical Bible Study session with my Western Christian Theologian brothers rather irksome and a bore. Not only why we remain in the Christian fold, but as one West African Christian young man asked me in Bezel: ‘Why do we then continue to seek to convert the devotees of ATR?’”

The question why we are still in the Christian fold can be answered in different ways. For Setiloane, he felt like someone who has been bewitched and found it difficult to shake off the Christian witchcraft with which Africa has been bewitched for more than 150 years:

I cannot say I necessarily like where I am. Secondly, I rationalize my position by taking the view that to be Christian I do not have to endorse every detail of so-called Western Christian Orthodox Historical Theology. Instead it is enough that I confess “Jesus as the Christ of God” i.e. as the most unique unprecedented and so far unrepeated or surpassed human manifestation of Divinity. Note here that I do not say “God” as that might restrict. Is not the most ancient Creed of Christians, before the advent of the second and third

¹⁴ See Setiloane published article: *Confessing Christ today*, in Journal of Theology in Southern Africa. Vol. 12, September 1975:29-38. Also “*Christus heute bekennen: aus der Afrikanische Sicht von Mensch und Gemeinschaft*” in Zeitschrift für Mission”, vol. 2, No. 1, 1976.

dimension, simply that “Jesus the Christ is the son of God”? It is the theologians of the first five centuries who kept messing it up, the most erroneous ones succeeding because of political reasons.

As I see it, the next task of the African Theology is seriously to grapple with the question of Christology – who is Jesus? How does he become the supreme human manifestation of the Divinity? What does Messiah-ship or *Christos* become in the African context? Setiloane argued that “Some German theologians were scandalised when I suggested that I would like to look for the Messiah *Christos* idea in African thinking somewhere in the area of African” *Bongaka*¹⁵ and possession of individual persons by Divinity.

As Setiloane argues, African Divinity challenges African scholarship undertaken by Africans themselves and should be coupled with serious work into pneumatology.

Another area that needs immediate attention, especially in Southern Africa, is the subtle tension between Black Theology versus African Theology. One notes that there have been current debates and discussions but there is apparent lack of a theological position in this regard.

It is interesting to note and cite Setiloane’s position in this regard,

Of course I believe that Desmond Tutu, like most South Africans, is confused as to which is the call he feels in his chest. African Theology or Black Theology. Therefore he lays the charge of being “brainwashed effectively to think that Western Value systems and categories are of universal validity” at the wrong door. For instance, I maintain that his call on African Theology to recover its “prophetic calling” is using a Western Orthodox Christian cliché. Black Theology, he confesses to embrace, has far too easily employed Western Christian norms and understandings like “prophetic” without examining their presuppositions. When African Theology ventures into this area, and I agree with Desmond Tutu it is high time we did (the fact that the advent of Idi Amin in Uganda has sent African Theologians scattering out of that seat of our thinking is evidence of the urgent need for us to engage in this), it will need to apply its theological Divinity but also the implications of *Participation Vitale* in one dynamically related community of beings, human, animal and plant and its theology of Man not only as part of that plethora of beings but as a participant in divinity as we say in my context the idea that *Motho ke Modimo*: Man is a sacred being. I am sure this, as a starting point of African Theology’s contribution to the questions of religion and Man in community, should give all of us, especially the Black Theologians, the leg up which they are so desperately crying for.

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¹⁵ Setiloane defined *ngaka* is an African traditional doctor often derogatively called “witchdoctor”. For a fuller treatment of this view see his book publication *Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, AA Balkema & Son: Rotterdam. 1976:317, Chapter 4 & 5.

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