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**African Christologies: Naming Jesus**

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*A summary account of the various aspects of African christology, the principles used to develop it through simultaneous attention to African anthropology and culture and the data of revelation, and how this theology enriches and relates to the received formulations of faith. ["African Descriptive Christologies on Naming Jesus", *Vidyajyoti: Journal of Theological Reflection* 65 (2001): 667-76].*

This essay is about the recapture of Jesus, his deeds, his images, and the understanding people have of him. I will analyze the description and results of African Jesus research and show how and why this research is so inspired by African cultural anthropology that it does not question the ontological reality of a man whose "friends" claimed that he was Christ, the Son of God. The analysis will have three sections. First, I will relocate the manifestation of the Jesus research. This will allow me, in the second section, to define the conditions and methods generally used in African christologies. Third, I will discuss the various names given to Jesus in Africa, such as *Ancestor par excellence*, *Ancestor who-gives-life*, *Great Ancestor*, and *Unique Ancestor*.

This leads me to point out the main effects of giving Jesus such titles as the above.

- 1) Jesus' person is more concrete, and his presence is better felt in people's lives.
- 2) Jesus' person is connected to his relationship with human life. In Ewe-Mina, Togo, he is called *Djoto-Ancestor* (Ancestor-who-is-the-source-of-life); in Kikuyu, Kenya, *Brother*, in Luba, D. R. Congo, *Elder Brother Par Excellence*.
- 3) The authority of Jesus' person is manifested. People see him as *Chief of Chiefs* (Luba), *King* (Akan, Ghana), *Victor Over Death* (*Sukuma*, Tanzania).
- 4) Jesus is seen as a bearer of life: *Chief Diviner* (Luo, Kenya), *Deliverer* (Akan, Ghana), *Healer* (Kirundi, Burundi), *Supreme Healer* (Luo, Kenya/Tanzania). In Africa a person is his name; names are projections of one's life, and they design an agenda that is transmitted from generation to generation. When this principle is applied to Jesus, his names have a strong impact on believers.

### **Relocating christological themes**

African christologies are influenced by the places where they are formulated. They must be relocated in those places if one wants to comprehend their inner significance. This can be done by means of:

**Contextualization.** Jesus is given specific attributes in specific situations (true Ancestor, perfect Healer, unique Brother, and so on). He is one of us though still beyond the prototypes.

**Relation.** African christologies describe Jesus as always in relationship with God and with Christians. A fundamental assumption of African anthropology is: I am because we are. The attainment of the fullness of a person is conditioned by the relationships that make a community. A person is son/daughter of, brother/sister of. In the case of Jesus, he is mediator because he is related to God and to humankind at the same time. That is why encounter with Christ, the Son of God, is the only way to enter God's mystery. Such a mediation partakes deeply of the African worldview; thus, the intercessional role played by Jesus confines his being among us as God-with-us.

**Re-appropriation.** The attempt to present an African christology results from an extended debate on whether or not there is/will be an African theology. Years ago when the question emerged, the main effort

was to prove that there were seeds of theology in Africa. The application of basic biblical and theological insights served as evidence for the possibility of an African christology. After that, themes, language, and even the philosophical background were supposed to convince anyone still in doubt. Though such an effort deserves respectful consideration, a question remains: why should African christology follow unchangeably the same development as non-African christology? By doing so, it fails to take the necessary distance from what has been framed and shaped abroad. In other words, non-African christology was taken almost as the obvious standard, and this influenced the reformulation of Jesus' images and names.

**Liberation and salvation.** These two themes could be called the soil on which African christologies are growing. They are the aim of life, and they represent ultimate glorification in God's kingdom. It is well known that the understanding of existence as struggle between Life and Death is at the center of what I have called the cosmotheandric dimension of the person. In presenting Jesus as victor over death, there is actually no gap between christology and African cultural elements; that is why the doctrine of Jesus' resurrection appears to be accommodated without serious misunderstanding.

### Conditions and methods

The conditions and methods of African christology have been shaped by contestation and claim. With this in mind we should be able more easily to identify the stakes involved. In the post-colonial era, the claim and contestation were against the general trends of "hegemony" and "imperialism" in Western theology. One can distinguish at least three groups that found themselves operating as intellectual circles in Africa. The Kinshasa school (V. Mulago, O. Bimwenyi-Kweshi, et al.) wanted to define some "specific values" to legitimize an African theology. In these temps, the quest for an authentic Christianity passes through a re-appropriation of theological and cultural values. In the Yaoundé school (M. Hebga, J.-M. Ela, et al.), theologians opted for a more historical and political approach. They were sensitive to the "afflicted social memory" of the victims of history; that is why the option for a total liberation seems to be more functional. In Abidjan on the Côte d'Ivoire, fundamental theology operated on the concept of "inculturation". The methods used in these schools and the conditions in which theologians addressed various issues could correct the opinion that African theology first took place in a mode of self-affirmation. It does not suffice to argue that one can "theologize" or has to "theologize" to affirm that one does effectively "theologize":

### Adaptation and correlation

What, then, are the characteristic methods of African christologies? Basically, there is tacit agreement on the legacy of Nicaea and Chalcedon. The doctrines and definitions of these two councils are adapted and correlated to prove the "feasibility" of christology in the African context. Thus did Nyaniti; thus also did most of the contributors to the volume edited by R. Gibellini, *Paths of African Theology*.

To my knowledge the only African author who has examined the ontological aspect of Jesus and called for the recapture of a Jesus beyond the dogmas is F. Eboussi Boulaga. His stirring book, *Christianity without Fetish*, suggests a re-reading of the person of Jesus in light of the history of religions. Here he presents the religionist historical background which is the framework for any messiah or hero:

The hero is not a god. Jesus Christ is not simply God and nothing more. He is the child of the Mother, the Son of man, before he is the Son of the Father or Son of God. He is the figure of fulfilled humanity for us. But humanity is fulfilled only in identifying with the life of the Spirit animating the community, for the Spirit is life. Jesus is not everything. He is not the Father. His glory, his definitive being are received by him from the Father, in an everlasting being-together-With the Father. The communion of Father and Son has not yet appeared. Christ in glory is yet to come, at the consummation of the ages, according to the faith that is hope. (144)

Thus, according to Eboussi Boulaga, Jesus' humanity is prior to his divinity, and it cannot be otherwise. As may be appreciated, Eboussi Boulaga did not transpose into an African language any word confirming the correlation or adaptation of Western theology. Rather, he questioned the very being of Jesus as God, Son of God, the Christ.

### Location in traditional theology

Where is, therefore, the consistency of African christologies in respect to traditional theology? I will use the framework drawn by R. Haight as *criteria* for christology:

**Humanity and divinity.** In African christology both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus are recognized; however-being Brother, Ancestor, Proto-ancestor, Healer, Diviner-Jesus is portrayed as superhuman. His divinity overshadows his humanity and downplays his historical insertion into the human race. Thus the model of the incarnate God follows the Chalcedon christological doctrine of two natures (human and divine). C. Nyamiti, whose anthropological background appears clearly in his christology, is still marked by the scholastic and Chalcedonian doctrines, to say the least.

**Resurrection.** That we pass from death to new life is a common belief in African traditions. The christologist B. Bujo holds that the Proto-ancestor is the unique source of life and the "One From Whom All Life Flows". God's risen Son brings the plenitude of life as a consequence of his journey through death. To witness to new life in Christ, the paschal mystery is lived through struggle and suffering, which are overcome by life without end. Thus change and transformation are the means of overcoming obstacles. The Christian adaptation of these beliefs in an African Christian context follows quite easily: the resurrection of Jesus is then the glorification of the "powerful hero".

**Trinity.** Considering what matters in Christian theology-namely the data of revelation-an attempt has been made to find correlations between the Trinity and African beliefs and relationship with God. The trinitarian ancestral relations, for instance, provide some cultural elements to define an analogous relationship in the triune God. They involve kinship, the superhuman sacred status, the mediating role, exemplarity, and the right to sacred communication. For Nyamiti these characteristics offer a good parallel between basic structures of the human person and the inner life of God. [Editor's note: see Charles Nyamiti, 'The Trinity: an African ancestral perspective,' *Theology Digest* 45 (1998): 21-26].

**Intelligibility.** The coherence and readability of African christology rely on the knowledge one has of both christology and African cultural elements. But an objection can be raised about the possibility of a contemporary critical interpretation of Nicaea and Chalcedon, since they are still the fixed references in christology. In R. Haight's words,

They [Nicaea and Chalcedon] represent the first major inculturation of the Christian message regarding Jesus Christ into Greek and Roman cultures in the early centuries of the Common Era... Because they have become and remain classics of the Christian faith, these doctrines have to be interpreted. (*Jesus Symbol of God* 297)

In sum, the descriptions of Jesus in African christologies are an effort to re-appropriate the central figure of Christian faith in a context that entails new vision. Probably this vision could be more suitable in reinterpreting the legacies of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Unlike many of today's christologies, African christologies are adaptations, with African tools and languages, of traditional declarations. In raising this issue, I do not intend to call for a radical rejection of what we believe. The point is that if Nicaea and Chalcedon have to be meaningful for us, they should be read with new eyes-in a new language.

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