

AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Origins and Perspectives

Francis Anekwe Oborji

African theology had existed largely in oral form and *less* systematic as it were. However, from the middle of the twentieth century or so, we have seen an abundant production of works of African authors on Christian theology from an African perspective in a more systematic way. Generally speaking, the writings of African theologians deal with two main topics: on the one hand, the meeting of the Gospel with African culture and traditional religion (theology of inculturation and dialogue with African Traditional Religion (ATR)); and on the other, the Gospel and human promotion in Africa (or African liberation theology). The two trends are not contradictory but rather complement each other. In fact, they represent two sides of the same process of making Christianity a truly African religion. So, nowadays, African theologians present a more unitary perception of inculturation and liberation theology (human promotion). This unitary perception of inculturation and liberation trends in the writings of African authors has produced a new trend in African theology, namely, the theology of reconstruction. In the three principal trends of African theology, namely, inculturation, liberation and reconstruction, African theologians attempt to relate the Christian message to the socio-cultural, political and economic reality of Africa. In a way, African theology evolved in the context of giving a theological response to the changing African reality, and as a search in African culture and traditional religion for elements that could aid in the efforts towards making Christianity a truly African religion. African theology as such did not begin in academic institutions, but was born in international congresses and conferences organized by the African scholars.

In each stage of its development, the theological conversation in the continent has always operated at the level of the encounter between Christianity and African culture and religious tradition. African theology draws on Christian traditions and sources: Scripture, Church Fathers, and the Scholastics. But these foundational sources do not exhaust the field of theological scholarship. When it comes to doing theology in Africa, there are alternative and complementary sources. In diverse ways, since African theology is a contextualised theology, African authors appeal to African religious traditions, cultures, histories, and contexts as equally, valuable and valid sources of theologising. Of critical importance is the conversation and dialogue that must exist between African theology and the so-called African Independent Churches or Sects. They also constitute theological sources as well. Besides, the authors look beyond documentary materials as theological sources. They look also inward to tap from rich mine of personal experience. African theology demonstrates beyond doubt that the authors ask personal, pertinent questions not as ivory-tower academicians but as believing and practicing Christians who have experience to substantiate their claims. This is what some have called African appropriation of the scholastic definition of theology as faith seeking understanding, however, with the fundamental difference that while *fides quaerens intellectum* hinges on a Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), the quest of African authors pivots on the African epistemological axiom *Cognatus sum, ergo sumus* (we are in relation, therefore, I am). In fact, in the African context, theology is inseparable from the theologian's personal faith narrative, quest, and journey as these unfold within and are fed by concerns of and from his or her Christian community. Indeed, shared faith narrative, quest, and journey are grist for theological mill among the African authors.

Again, the writings of African theologians cut across denominational line. Though there is a noticeable influence of denominational sensibility and focus of individual authors, yet their approach generally, is ecumenical in nature and focus. It is from this ecumenical perspective that the present essay wishes to present African Christian theology. The paper does not pretend to treat in detail all the major currents and crosscurrents in the writings of African theologians as we know them today. It will also be difficult to cover all the efforts in various countries. Africa is a continent of immense diversity, not only on the level of its geographical contrasts, but especially on the cultural,

historical, sociological, psychological, political and economic levels. Therefore, in speaking of Africa one should take account of the reality of its diversity so as to guard against the danger of *facile* generalizations about the continent and its peoples. However, in spite of the diversity, one could still speak about the continent as a whole. And in our context, behind the diversities found in the works of African theologians, there is a common perspective and many elements that unify and characterize their writings and theological project. In this essay, we shall be guided as follows in our study of African theology as we know it today:

1. The Context of African Theology
2. The Growth and Development of African Theology
3. Trends in African Theology
4. Conclusion

The Context of African Theology

African theology, or what some call African Christian theology, is that theology which reflects on the Gospel, the Christian tradition, and the total African reality in an African manner and from the perspectives of the African worldview. The African reality in question includes the changing African society. Some prefer to speak of theologies because they see much diversity in African culture and religion; others see a fundamental similarity in the religious experience and in the nature of the emergent issues. Discussion of African theology usually considers the scene in Sub-Saharan Africa, leaving aside the African origins of the Coptic tradition in Egypt and Ethiopia as well as the decadent Church of Carthage of North Africa. These North African churches gave the Christian world its first faculties (schools) of theology in Alexandria (for the Church of East) and in Carthage (for the Church of the West). Great theologians such as Athanasius, Cyril, Origen, Clement, were from the theological school of Alexandria in Egypt, while Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine among others were from the theological school of Carthage in the Maghreb region of North Africa. Modern authors are beginning to call for the recognition of the African origins of the theological thoughts of these early Church Fathers from North Africa so as to link them with the present-day efforts of African theology.

The expression, "African Theology" in the singular is the *la mode* among the African theologians, who prefer to take the whole of Africa together and speak simply of African theology, and of that which unites us rather than what divides us. But the expression "African Theology" in the singular may be very deceptive, as there are many theologies and diverse theological methods, determined largely by the different conceptions of theology itself and by the diversity of contexts. Hence, some speak of "African Theologies" in the plural, to distinguish between the various trends, *inculturation and liberation, and reconstruction* (each with its own currents and crosscurrents). The use of the expression "African theologies" in the plural, also refers to the two types of the theology corresponding to its two main sources: 1) African traditional (non-Christian) theology as found in African Traditional Religion, and 2) African Christian theology, meaning a systematic and scientific presentation or elaboration of the Christian faith according to the needs and mentality of the Africans. In this regard, a more correct term should be "African Christian Theology", as distinguished from other theologies, like that of ATR, which may also be called "African theology."

Nevertheless, the diversity of perspectives does not destroy their basic unity which permits the use also of the expression, "African theology" in the singular. They all constitute an effort by the African Christians to read the word of God and to interpret their faith in the light of their experience as a people. African theology is that theology which reflects on the Gospel, the Christian tradition, and the total African reality in an African manner and from the perspective of the African worldview. Africans and missionaries who have contributed to this effort are all referred to, as African theologians. In fact, this effort does not become African theology just because it has been done by an African. Rather, African theology is African because it speaks of African problems from

the African viewpoint. It presents an African understanding of the mystery of Christ's salvation as it applies to an African situation.

Again, a closer look at the works of the African authors reveals a theological language that puts a heavy accent on culture and the common origin of the human family. This accent and consciousness that emphasizes the positive value of the African culture and context as well as the universal brotherhood of the human family, was first noticed in the early attempts by some authors to articulate what we have come to call today, African Philosophy. Hence, in speaking of the African theology, we are also dealing with the intrinsic connection between philosophy and theology in the development of that theology itself. In other words, philosophical approach dominated the early attempts of the African authors to articulate in writing, the cultural and religious heritage of the Africans in the light of the Christian faith and their experience as a people. In this regard, the leading voices came from Francophone African countries (and also from the Anglophone and Portuguese speaking countries of the continent as well as from the Africans in Diaspora). The primary focus of these investigations in African Traditional Religion, culture and customs, was to articulate the African concept of “ontology” or rather of “ultimate reality” and its relation with human life and history. How do we bring the African world view and traditional religion into contact with the liberty and historicity of the self-communication of God in Jesus? In these studies, African authors discovered that the Africans’ preoccupation with life and its security provides the ingredients for our understanding of their concepts of ontology - the divine beings, in particular of God as the Supreme Being who is the “ultimate reality” that is above all history and that is at the root of the religious formulations of the Africans. The value which the Africans attach to life, its prolongation and security is the basis for our understanding of their concepts of ontology. In fact, the whole efforts in African Traditional Religion are geared towards the protection and guarantee of life and its security. Thus, from this standpoint, the authors began to study the African concepts of life and to demonstrate that *life* stands out for the Africans as a value around which other values find their meaning. The search and project for life that is meaningful, its continuity and dynamic progress towards fullness and realization (ancestral status, divinization) are fundamental for our understanding of African person’s perception of ontology and ultimate meaning.

Therefore, while African theology acknowledges the serious challenge posed to modern theology today by the radical relativism in the theology of religions, secularism, the dialogue with post-modernity and between the West and East, for the African authors, the basic issue is dialogue with the cultures and our historical past for the sake of the future and the present. The African theologians insist that dialogue with the cultures and our historical past is linked to the question of creating new cultural identity for the Africans which is very essential to deepening the faith of African Christians as well as in promoting the work of evangelization in the continent. The theologians want to show the strength Africans could draw from their ancestral history for the creation of a new cultural identity. Therefore, the challenge, as seen by the African authors, is to explore how African culture have come into contact with the Christian and Western thought-pattern and to emphasize those things that unite the peoples of various races, cultures and religions. How will this contact and facts of our common origin in God and faith in Jesus Christ, encourage and enable those from each tradition to learn from the other and by so doing foster a more humane understanding of how to see ourselves, each other and the world at large? This is the spirit that has continued to permeate the development of theological reflection in contemporary Africa.

The Growth and Development of African Theology

Two main stages have been identified in the development of theological thoughts in contemporary Africa. The first stage started with the debates on the theology of adaptation. Some African theologians were inspired by Placide Tempels' work on *Bantu philosophy* (originally

published in 1945). They began to seek for African philosophical categories to articulate a systematic way of presenting the Gospel to the Africans. The method was influenced by the Scholastic theology. However, this first attempt has been criticized for its *concordism* and lack of scientific vigour. The second stage began with anthropological approach. Things began to change with the new discoveries and developments in social sciences in the early twentieth century. The new scholarship in social sciences and its subsequent application to Christian missionary activities opened up new prospects for missiological and theological reflection and research. People once considered uncivilized and uncultured were discovered, after careful study, to have complete cultural systems, religious beliefs and high moral standards. It was also realized that culture had a much deeper influence on the person than was previously thought. And that merely converting individuals and isolating them from their native cultural milieu so as to protect their faith was a useless endeavour. Rather, what is required is authentic conversion through a real penetration of the cultural milieu itself with Gospel values. This new development in the appreciation of culture and its impact on the person, introduced a further challenge in missiological reflection: is it justifiable to transplant for the sake of uniformity, a Christianity developed in another cultural context, to all peoples and cultures around the world? This challenge initiated the debate on missionary adaptation and the development of the theology of adaptation in the first half of the twentieth century. Missionaries and theologians in the local churches of Africa were not aloof to the debate. Their contribution to the debate gave rise to the birth of what we call today African theology.

Furthermore, inspired by the new development in social sciences and its attendant anthropological approach as well as the open attitude of recent church teachings on the meeting of the Gospel with local cultures of non-Western worlds, the African theologians began to use cultural categories to interpret the Christian message and to demonstrate that Christianity is the true religion for the Africans. They also started to make ethical judgement on the African situation on the basis of their Christian conviction. The method being used is functional analogy. The result of this approach is the two early trends of African theology, *inculturation* and *liberation* as mentioned before, which constitute the core of contemporary African theology. The most recent result of this approach is the evaluation of the two trends under the title, African theology of reconstruction.

The inculturation theology in this context is an attempt by the African Christians themselves to interpret the Christian message and to provide models from their own cultural heritage for an African reading of the mystery of Christ, the church, liturgy, Christian morality, spirituality, and so forth. Rooted in the common faith in Jesus Christ, his Gospel message, and in communion with all the local churches of the universal Church-Family, with the Chair of Peter as the centre of communion (for the Catholics), the theology is an attempt by the Africans to reflect on the Christian faith which has come down to them. It is also an effort of the African authors to make their own contributions to the development of the common Christian patrimony and to illumine the Christian faith in the continent with African thought-patterns, cultural heritage and traditions. The liberation theology (in this context, human promotion), is the effort of the theologians to make an ethical reflection on the African situation as they relate the Christian message to the socio-cultural, political and economic reality of the continent. Theology of reconstruction has come to challenge the two early trends, inculturation and liberation, to be socially transformative oriented.

This, in a nut-shell, is the background for our understanding the path of development of theological reflection in contemporary Africa. The origin of this theological effort in the continent

has been traced back to 1956 with the publication of *Des Prêtres noirs s'interrogent* (Black Priests question themselves). In that volume, a group of young African theologians raised questions about how theology was being done in Africa and whether or not things could be different, both theologizing in a more genuinely African way and dealing with topics important to Africans. Since the time that first call was made to develop a genuinely African Christian theology till today, volumes have been written, conferences and symposia on the topic are held on regular basis. Today we have Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians and a number of research centres and universities have been founded with the specific aim of promoting studies and research on African theology. Besides, there are regional, national and local associations of African theologians. But, in all, African authors operate within the broad scope of the nature of the meeting of the Gospel message with the African culture and reality.

Several factors have favoured the development of African theology. Apart from the impacts of modern scholarship of social sciences and the experience of the African churches themselves, the development in the political scene at the time had also a great influence in stimulating theological reflections among African Christian scholars. Beginning from the nineteenth century onwards, political and human rights activists' movements such as "Pan-Negro" that were at the base of this development started to rise. These were activists' movements calling for the recognition of the human dignity of the Africans, who in the first place were the victims of the slave trade, followed by the racial oppression and colonialism. Pioneer scholars and protagonists of these movements were of African-American origin, they so called Fathers of "Pan-Negro" Movements: William E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), Edward W. Blyden (1832-1912), Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) and George Padmore (1902-1959). Some of them had founded Afro-American Unions or Movements committed in the campaign against slavery.

Moreover, at the beginning of twentieth century many nationalist movements were founded in Africa by African intellectuals many of whom were educated in Europe or United States of America (USA). These were nationalists' movements for the struggle for political independence of Africa from the Western colonialism. The most famous among them are: "*Négritude*" (in the Francophone Africa) and the "African Personality" Movement (in the Anglophone Africa). Famous leaders and founders of these nationalists' movements include: Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001), Aimé Césaire (1913-) and Léon Gontran Damas (1912-1978) for the *Négritude*. There were also: Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904-1996), Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), Kenneth Kaunda (1924-), Julius Nyerere (1922-1999) for the "African Personality." Others include: Alex Quaison-Sackey (1924-1992), Okot p'Bitek (1931-1982), Mongo Beti (1932-2001) and Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1922-) for "African Black Consciousness" (Movement for the Conscientization of Black Africans). Apart from the struggle for political independence of Africa, these movements were also concerned in the search for the rediscovery of the African cultural values. The movements are known more for their defence of human dignity and African cultural identity.

Another source of inspiration for the development of African theology came from the experience of pioneer African Pastors (clergymen). For example, in the Protestant world, in West Africa, Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1807-1891), the first African to be ordained Bishop in the Anglican Church, was convinced of the peculiarity of Christianity. At the same time, he preached that Christianity does not have to destroy, as a matter of fact, the African character to make itself, relevant to the people. The famous pastor, Holy James Johnson (Sierra Leone, 1836-1917), also said that Christianity has not come into the world so that other religions would disappear. But it is a religion known for its readiness to adapt itself to every human race. Accepting this religion

(Christianity) does not mean de-nationalizing a people or making them lose their own identity. Rather it is the glory of God that every race and people profess and practice Christianity, communicating to it its' own peculiarity without "losing" nothing of their own virtue. Therefore, Johnson used to ask: "Why can't there be African Christianity as there already exist, European or Asian Christianity?"

Beginning from the early 1950s, inspiration towards developing theological reflections in African context dawned also on seminarians and priests from the continent that were studying or had studied in Europe and North America. Some universities in Europe and North America began to accept academic research papers and theses of African students on themes bordering on African culture and worldview in relation to the Christian faith. Thus, the emergence of the so called pioneer African theologians that Bénézet Bujo talked so much about in his edited three volume work (*African Theology: The Contribution of the Pioneers* (Paulines, Nairobi, 3 Vols. 2003, 2006, & 2013; the first two volumes were co-edited with J. Ilunga Muya). The so called pioneer African theologians presented in those works of Bujo and Ilunga Muya were principally inspired by the works on African culture and philosophy of some European missionaries in Africa such as that of Placide Temprels on Bantu philosophy, and G. Dufonteny on catechism and African culture. In his original study entitled, *Bantu Philosophy*, Temprels posited the life force as the central philosophical concept in the African world view. From this basic ontological structure, Temprels went further to develop his Bantu theory of person (*muntu*) as a relational ethics. Vincent Mulago from Congo was to take up this theory and would speak of life unity (*l'unione vitale*) as the very soul of African philosophy. And Stephen Ezeanya from Nigeria was to add the role of sacrifice and ancestral mediation in the maintenance of the *l'unione vitale*. Thus, the foundation of contemporary African theology was laid by Temprels and the works of Mulago and Ezeanya. Contemporary African theologians still place emphasis on relational philosophy and the ancestral mediation for an African reading of ontology and the mystery of Christ respectively.

The approach of these early authors was based on the old form of the theology of missionary adaptation. For many contemporary African theologians, the theology of adaptation is a process which seeks to "adapt the practices of the Western Church as much as possible to the socio-cultural life of African peoples as if Africans have no cultures of their own on which the Christian faith could anchor." Some African authors have tried to articulate the defects of adaptation theology. Naturally, their approach has been very critical. But it is a historical fact that African authors started their theological reflections with the adaptation theology. The theology of adaptation was sustained by subsequent debates such as the one that led to the publication of the anthology, *Des Prêtres noirs s'interrogent* (Black Priests question themselves). *Des Prêtres noirs s'interrogent* was followed by another anthology entitled, *Personnalité africaine et Catholicisme*, the result of a survey conducted in 1962 by the *Société Africaine de Culture*. The basic question remained that adaptation is concerned with giving a place to African culture in the church.

Thus, African theology was first articulated in academic conferences and congresses of African scholars. After the publication of the *Des Prêtres noirs s'interrogent* (1956) and the debate it had generated then in the Western world and the continent itself, African theology began to grow through organised conferences by the scholars themselves. In the continent, we have the celebrated symposial debates on "African Christianity and African theology", initiated in 1960 by the Faculty of the Catholic Theology, Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo). Of special interest were the debates of 1960 and 1968 between Alfred Vanneste, the Dean, and Tharcisse Tshibangu, then a student, later ordained a Bishop, who expressed his view in a talk entitled, *Vers une théologie de couleur africaine* (a theology with an African slant). He maintained that adaptation was not simply a matter of personnel, of having African Bishops and lay leaders; nor was it meant only to adapt the liturgy, and reform parish and pastoral structures. Rather it meant giving prominent place to key factors in Africa's world-view, and religion. He mentioned in particular, life-force, symbolism and intuition. According to him, these are "latent theological seeds" which adaptation could purify and

use as "religious analogous" to illumine theological problems confronting missionary activity in Africa. However, in his responding paper entitled, *D'abord une Vraie Théologie* (First, a True Theology), Vanneste said that adaptation means rising to a higher level, not descending to a lower. In this way, African theology and Christianity would be part of the world-wide theological endeavour.

After the Kinshasa debate on the possibility of African theology, subsequent theological reflection in the African context, were accompanied by congresses and conferences organised by African scholars. The first and the most important conference in this regard is the one which took place at Ibadan (Nigeria) in 1966. The Ibadan conference was held under the auspices of All African Council of Churches (AACC). The Ibadan conference signals the beginning of commitment of the African Protestant theologians for the African theology *en route*. Acts of the conference were published in an anthology entitled: *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (edited by K.A. Dickson and P. Ellingworth, Maryknoll : Orbis Books, 1969). The final communiqué of the Ibadan conference shares the idea of a kind of continuity between the concept of God in the African Traditional Religion and the God in the Bible, and said that it is because of this that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is rapidly taking root in the continent and among Africans. But the theologians also quickly added that the concepts of God in the two traditions are not exactly the same. Thus, they underlined some aspects of discontinuity between the theological concepts in the two traditions and hailed the theology of adaptation in vogue at the time. Another conference towards the development of African theology was held at Jos (Nigeria) in 1975. The Acts of the Jos conference were published in an anthology entitled: *Christianity in Independent Africa* (edited by E. Fashole-Luke, R. Gray, et al., Ibadan :University Press, 1978). The Jos conference underlined the emergence of political consciousness in the nascent African theology and the necessity of a theology of liberation for the independent Africa.

A year after the Jos conference, a congress of Third World Theologians took place at Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania) in August 1976. This signals the birth of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). The Dar-es-Salaam conference had as its objective the sharing of theological reflection among Third World Christian theologians: to discern the "signs of time", listening to the Spirit of the Risen Lord in the context of the existing division between the rich and the poor, examining the two distinctive perspectives in theology. The theologians gave the definition of the expression "Third World" in their final communiqué, to include not only those who live in Africa, Asia, Latin America, but all those who do not share the same economic development and self-determination as do the nations of former colonial masters of the Northern Hemisphere. Thus, the term "Third World" belongs basically to the field of socio-political and economic analysis even from the point of view of theological considerations. African theologians at the conference also affirmed that there exists one "Black world": "We are all Africans" in Africa, in North America, or in the Caribbean.

In December 1977 at Accra (Ghana), a conference of African theologians was held that led to the formation of the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians (EAAT) (a member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). The Accra Conference defined the perspective that gave birth to African theology. It was there that African theologians appropriated the term "inculturation." This conference brought together, for the first time, Catholic and Protestant Francophone and Anglophone African theologians. The conference placed the theme of "liberation" in its theological agenda. However, at the end, its new concept of theological unity came to be expressed in the term "inculturation". So that it could be said that when Father Arrupe, Superior General of the Jesuits defined the term in 1978, inculturation had already become a popular term among the African theologians. The Acts of this conference have been published under the title: *African Theology en Route* (edited by Appiah-Kubi, K. and S.Torres, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979).

The Accra conference restated in its final communiqué, the central motive of African theology: "We believe that African theology must be understood in the context of African life and culture and the creative attempt of African people to shape a new future for themselves ... from the African situation ... defining itself according to the struggles of the people in their resistance against the structures of domination. Our task as theologians is to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to

African people.” That the Gospel has come to remain in Africa cannot be denied, but now our theological reflections must be addressed to the real contextual African situations: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land, in a strange language, in a strange thought, in a strange ideology? (cf. Psalm 137, 4). For more than a decade now, the cry of the Psalmist has been the cry of many African Christians. We demand to serve the Lord in our own terms.” The struggle of African theologians, scholars, and other Christians in ventures such as this consultation is to find a theology that speaks to our people where we are, to enable us to answer the critical question of our Lord Jesus Christ: “Who do you (African Christians) say that I am?”

In August 1986 at Yaoundé (Cameroun), African women theologians gathered together for the first time to deliberate on themes they considered important for the development of African theology. The following themes were listed, among others: a) Woman and the Church, b) Woman and the Bible, c) Woman and Theology, d) Woman and Christology, e) Woman and Struggle for liberation, f) Woman and Spirituality. For the participants at the Yaoundé conference, the spiritual experience of life shows that God gives and *reveals* himself in a way known to him alone to each human person, without discrimination. Because of this, the African women theologians at the conference invited the church to give the woman her right place, also within the ecclesial structures. According to the women theologians, African anthropology considers the human being as bi-dimensional: man and woman, male and female; a man without a woman is not a complete person, but simply a project; the same thing is of a woman without a man. The human person complements one another: male and female God created us. All the structures: political, economic, cultural or religious, are institutions at the base of which there is complementarity of our being created, male and female by God. In this case, the complementary nature of human beings, male and female, comes to be interpreted in terms of its role and functions. When compared with the dominant discussion of the same issue of equality between sexes in political spheres, the position of the African women theologians looks a better approach to the debate. The women theologians contend that in Africa, religion is a place in which women feel more as guardians of life, where they have a unique role of interpreting. In addition, in some parts of Africa, the prophetic-priestly role is a function that is typically for female folk. In this case, the sexual discrimination evident in the Western Christian tradition is totally absent in African tradition.

From 1986 onwards, African women theologians have had other occasions of meeting together, especially, under the auspices of the so called, *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*, which was started by Mercy Amba Oduyoye of Ghana. They have expressed themselves in various meetings and congresses on the theme of African woman from the perspective of culture and religion. Leading voices among the African women theologians are: Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Bernadette Mbuy Beya, Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, Teresa Okure, Theresa Souga, Elizabeth Amoah, Luise Tappa, among others.

In general, African theologians - men and womenfolk altogether have participated in various meetings of EATWOT, where they have had the opportunity to bring at the international level, their project for African theology. A good number of African theologians got identified with the ideals and developments of both EATWOT and EAAT. For instance, the great mentor of many African theologians, Engelbert Mveng from Cameroun was elected Secretary General of EATWOT at its inaugural conference at Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania) in 1976. The participation of Africans in the proceedings of these associations helped to bring together their thoughts and theological perspectives. In all, the emphasis is always about the value of African cultural and religious heritage as well as the liberation of African peoples from the present situation of injustice, poverty, oppression, wars, discrimination and the marginal position of the continent.

Trends in African Theology

In what follows we shall attempt to give an overview of the three principal trends of African theology: inculturation, liberation, and reconstruction. In the inculturation trend of African theology two areas stand out for appraisal, namely: African Christology and Ecclesiology. In the liberation trend of African theology, the themes of poverty (Engelbert Mveng) and socio-political and economic situation of the continent (Jean-Marc Éla) have received the greatest attention of the African authors. Finally, the theology of reconstruction as a new trend in African theology is an attempt to unify the two early trends of inculturation and liberation theologies in Africa. African theology of reconstruction has continued with the old theme of cultural identity and social liberation but with a renewed emphasis on the role of the church and Christians on the social transformation of Africa.

African Christology: It is a credit to the fertility of contemporary African theologians that Christology is perhaps the one aspect of theology that has received their greatest attention. For the decisive factor in every Christian life is the response to the question of Christ: "Who do you (African Christians) say that I am (Matthew 16:15)?" It is a well known fact that Christology is the most fundamental aspect of Christian theology. Therefore, it behoves every church to make explicit its response to this question in a true and contextual manner. And without a proper understanding of Christ, His nature, His meaning and His message for man, Christianity itself becomes inauthentic. Thus, many Christological models have recently sprung up from the pens of many African theologians. Christ has been designated as the liberator, the ancestor, the first born son, the master of initiation, the healer, the African king, the African chief, mediator, saviour, redeemer with power, and so forth. All these are concepts and images very familiar to most African people and they can serve to illustrate the figure of Jesus Christ. African Christologies based on such specifically African concepts may be called "illustrative Christologies." Some have called it "narrative theology." Such Christologies have the merit of being sufficiently inculturated in African culture. They also serve a catechetical purpose since people can readily relate themselves to the images of Jesus Christ proposed by African Christologists. Of these, the model of Christ as our ancestor has received a lot of attention, especially in East and Central Africa as well as in West Africa. For some, it is, among other designations, the most distinctively African and the most profound. So much so that the "notion of the ancestor is so deeply embedded in African religious consciousness that the idea of Christ as ancestor seems to have arisen independently in the minds of different theologians in different parts of the continent."

Championed by such theologians as Bénézet Bujo (Dem. Rep. Congo), and Charles Nyamiti (Tanzania), it is perhaps one of the motifs that one can quite easily fit into most of Africa. Nyamiti's work, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Eldoret, Kenya; Gaba Publications, 1984), is perhaps the most elaborate presentation of the new Christology. Nyamiti examines the African's ancestral belief and concludes that there are basic similarities and differences between it and Christ's ancestorship. According to him, the five characteristics valid for both are natural relationship, supernatural status, mediation, being model of behaviour, and having title to regular, sacred communion. But the essential differences are not less in number. Nyamiti recognizes that Christ's relationship to man transcends family, clan or racial boundaries; Christ is God-man and Son of God; He is a more perfect model of behaviour, and has, being God, a supernatural model of communication. Still there is a basic sameness in structure with a difference of level and mode. Nyamiti thus defines brother-ancestor as a relative of a person with whom he has a common parent and of whom he is mediator to God, archetype of behaviour and with whom - thanks to his supernatural status acquired through death, he is entitled to have regular, sacred communion. On account of Christ's relationship in the Trinity and His relationship with man, His ancestorship is divine immanent and at the same time mediative, prophetic, royal and sacerdotal. Hence, for Nyamiti, the traditional titles of Christ are incorporated in His ancestorship. He affirms that from an African perspective, Christ could be called our "Brother-Ancestor" because through him and in the divine Spirit, we have been reconciled with God and made partakers of the Trinitarian life. This has consequences for the

Christians who are now invited to live a life of sharing and communion in the pattern of the Trinitarian life.

With slightly different nuances and in what looks like a more acceptable approach, Bénézet Bujo (in his book, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), attributes to Christ the title of “Ancestor par excellence”, that is of “Proto-Ancestor” in whom the whole life of the African Christian can be rooted. To arrive at this title Bujo does not place Christ the ancestor at the level of biological lineage (as Nyamiti did) as if Christ is just one of the ordinary human ancestors, that is, at the level of consanguinity. Rather Christ the ancestor is of the transcendental level. Christ is the “Ancestor par excellence”, the “Proto-Ancestor”, that is, the “Unique Ancestor” who is the source of life and the highest model of all ancestor-ship. Bujo proposes Christological-Eucharistic ecclesiology, oriented towards the African concept of life. He examines the significance of Jesus as life-giver, a central theme in the New Testament, especially in Pauline theology. For Paul draws a parallel between the first and second Adam (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:45ff; Romans 5:12ff), and speaks of Christ as the First-born from the death, as the Head of the body, the church (Colossians 15:20). In him resides the fullness of God, who has chosen to use him to reconcile all things (Colossian 1:19-20). In John, Jesus is presented as one who has come so that his followers may have life and have it in abundance (John 10:10). He gives his life for the sheep (John 10:11-15). Jesus is the true vine, and we can only bear fruit when we remain attached to him (John 15:1-6). Even more, Jesus is the resurrection, and the one who lives in him and believes in him will never die (John 11:25-26). This implies that the exalted Jesus is the means through which God imparts his divine life to the world; he is, as it were, the Bread of life, the source of eternal life (John 6:32-58), and therefore, the proto-life source.

In other words, in the African theology, Christ is seen as the life-giving ancestor and one who presides over the new family of God, the new extended universal family. The same Jesus Christ can be considered as the Great Healer, the Liberator and the Great Master of Initiation. Throughout Africa there are processes of initiation viewed as rites of passage at every stage of human existence, but more markedly at the passage from adolescence to adulthood. According to Anselme T. Sanon of Burkina Faso, Christ was initiated in the customs of his Jewish people. He was also initiated into God’s plan, which was the route to his perfection through obedience in his death and resurrection. Christ’s initiation into a new existence is the *raison d’être* of our being initiated into a new existence, and he himself leads us into the fullness of life. Thus he comes to be Master of initiation, the elder brother in his father’s foyer, initiating others into the same household. Christ is also designated as the African king (Chris Manus), who like the traditional African potentates is very much concerned about the spiritual and physical well-being of the people. The African kings fulfilled significant *sacramental* roles for their communities, and through their annual festivals maintained harmony between their societies and their Ultimate Reality. Through an equally detailed examination of Christ’s designation as king in the scriptures, Chris Manus the author of this model of African Christology, argues that the visions and the conceptions of African kingship cultures can enrich the same concept in the New Testament, at least for the African mind.

John Pobee, an Anglican Pastor and theologian from Ghana is another advocate of Ancestorship Christology. In his seminal work, *Towards an African Theology* (published by Abingdon Press in 1979) Pobee attributes to Christ the title of "the Great and Greatest Ancestor - in Akan language *Nana*." He seeks to answer the question, "Why should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe or nation?" For Pobee, the reason can be

located, firstly, in the "functional", or existential activity of Jesus (as the New Testament itself expresses), which focuses on the deeds of Jesus in relation to the individual believer. In this way, Jesus' divinity is described essentially in functional terms and, in a certain sense, is displayed through the humanity. This agrees with the Akan outlook, which prefers concreteness to abstraction. Secondly, as Ancestor (*Nana*) the God-man is characterized by the power and authority to judge, reward, and punish men. However, Pobee emphasizes the superiority of the Ancestorship of Christ to that of other ancestors "by virtue of being closest to God and as God. As *Nana* he has authority over not only the world of men but also of all spirit beings, namely the cosmic powers and the ancestors." For Pobee the practical relevance of this Christology include: "To say that Jesus is *Nana* is to let his standards reign supreme in personal orientation, in the structures of society, in the economic processes, and in political forces. It means in practical terms personal and social justice and re-creation..." For some critics, Pobee's Christology does not touch the crucial issue of how Christ is not a tribal (*Nana*) ancestor. Obviously, people from other tribes may not accept Christ the *Nana* of the Akan as their own ancestor in that order. It follows therefore, that Christ transcends the *Nana* of Akan people.

However, in the view of African theologians, it is meaningful for the African to speak of Jesus as Ancestor par excellence, for in him are fulfilled all the qualities and virtues that the Africans ascribe to their ancestors. In other words, the historical Jesus fulfils the highest ideals ascribed to the ancestors in African thought – he heals, he cures, he raises the dead, and so on. In short, he imparts life force in all its fullness. This love and power he bequeaths, after death, to his disciples. It is precisely in his death and resurrection, with its soteriological meaning that Jesus transcends the ancestors. This is Christology from below and provides a point of departure for a Christology in the African context. Consequently, the theologians describe the church as the focal point from which the life of the proto-ancestor flows and spreads to all humanity. Thus, they see the Eucharist as the "ancestral meal" instituted by the proto-ancestor and as that which should stand at the heart of African ecclesiology. The Eucharist is not simply an object of contemplation. But rather, it is the very life of the church and the source of its growth, life that is not merely biological generation, but rather mystical and spiritual. The purpose of the Eucharist (as with some African death-life ritual) is to impart life in all its fullness for the welfare of the whole community. This life is the Spirit. For the African theologians, the ancestral model is Trinitarian, in that the Father, Son and Spirit are the source, imparter, and substance respectively of the divine life in the community. An ecclesiology based on such an ancestral model presents a number of challenges to the life of the church. For in the traditional African society, each member is expected to make his or her contributions to the vital force of the whole community. The meeting point of Christianity and ATR could be found in this concept of communitarian life, sharing and relationality.

African critics of Ancestral Christology, raise some basic questions about the relevance of an *Ancestral Christology* theologically and socio-culturally. Theologically, can the ancestor Christological paradigm really serve to reveal the whole person of Jesus Christ? How do we exploit this concept to capture all the richness of the Traditional Christology within the context of the theology of the Trinity? How about non-African Christian believers in Jesus Christ? It is not clear how the life of Christ is imparted to these biological ancestors, whether it is on the basis of a common grace (as Nyamiti seems to say) or by a kind of universalism derived from the efficacy of the resurrection, as Bujo argues. If Christ is the mystical and spiritual Brother-Ancestor, how can he be related to biological ancestors who are not strictly within the community bound together by faith? Socio-culturally, if this ancestor model is to be valid today, how long will it have relevance

in Africa given the momentum of the process of modernization, urbanization and universalism of education? As a result, the ancestor paradigm may have to be re-examined and evaluated by emerging African theologians.

The Universal Value of African Traditional Religion (ATR): Another major area of theological reflection among the African authors where progress has been made in the context of inculturation is the evaluation of the universal value of African Traditional Religion. Since ATR is the religious context and milieu from which many of the African Christians come from, it has the role of an interlocutor in the meeting of the gospel message and the African people. In this project, African theologians first sought to investigate the idea of God and other minor spirits in ATR and to explore their relevance in the missionary enterprise in the continent. Important authors of this effort include: John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, among others. Here attention is given to the African concepts of God as *the way the divine providence has prepared* this portion of God's people for the reception of the Christian message through the proclamation of the Gospel. The theological debate is about the presence of the divine grace in the traditional religions and cultures before and after the Incarnation-Event. For the African theologians, Christ is both the source and fulfilment of the religious aspirations of the traditional African. Again, thinking Christologically, and in the logic of the incarnation, the theologians demonstrate that the African concepts of God as the Supreme Being show how God, in his divine grace and mercy accompanies this portion of his people in their internal and transcendental history and, thereby prepared them for the reception of the message of salvation in Christ. The African theology also insists that relating African concepts of God to Christianity does not mean reducing the divine grace to ATR. It does not also mean equating the ATR with Christianity. Rather, it is to demonstrate how this divine grace, also serves in the missionary theory of preparation for the gospel. This is evident by the elaborate efforts in African theology in pointing out not only the continuity but especially, the differences between the African concepts of God and that of Christianity.

In this endeavour, African theology highlights the positive elements of the African religion and culture and shows how with the Christ-Event, the people's search for God in their traditional religion and culture has now found its fulfilment in Christianity. In other words, the concept of God in African traditional religion, serves as an interlocutor for the African Christian appreciation and interpretation of the Christian God which they received through the preaching of the missionaries over one hundred years ago. Thus, one can say that the missionaries did a good job of planting the Christian faith among the people the providence has already prepared in their conscience and culture for the reception of the gospel message. No wonder the open receptivity of the Africans and the rapid growth of the Christian faith in the continent.

The concern in African theology in this regard is influenced and guided by the modern scholarship on theology of religions and interreligious dialogue. Theologians today are invited to explore, in their reflection on the existence of other religious traditions and cultures, the meaning of God's salvific plan, to explore if and in what way various religious traditions contain and offer religious elements which comes from God, and which are part of what the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions (cf. *Dominus Iesus*, nos. 14, 21).

African Ecclesiology: One particular area where African theologians appeared to have achieved a somewhat progress in the area of inculturation is in ecclesiology. For instance, the African Catholic theologians' reading of the Vatican II ecclesiology of church as communion with the African concept of the family received great acceptance by the church leaders at the synod of bishops for Africa which was held in Rome in 1994. The African image of the Church-as-Family of God, the universal family of all believers in Christ is a major high point of theological development in the continent. It is an ecclesiology developed in the context of proclamation and evangelisation with its inspiration from Paul's letter to the Ephesians on reconciliation of the Jews and the pagans with one another and with God (Ephesians 2, 11-22). This model has also inspired the theme for the Synod of Bishops II Special

Assembly for Africa: “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.” The reconciliation which God has achieved for all in Christ is to be witnessed in Africa. It is reconciliation, first of all with God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ is therefore the source of the human unity, of reconciliation and healthy relationship among the Africans themselves and between them and the people of other races. In Christ, all the barriers that were used to separate Africans from the rest of human race have been rendered useless.

The model of the Church-as-Family found great reception among the Africans principally because of its anthropological basis in the African context. It is a concept which Africans can easily appreciate and identify with, because of its African value of the extended family, bound together by the ancestral blood and community life. Africans emphasize life, communal living and sharing. Again, this model summarizes the previous concerns of African scholarship about the integration and acceptance of the black race into the human family. African authors believe that the question of history of the continent in its relationship with people of other races is an important point of departure for theological discourse. In the early development of contemporary African scholarship emotional issues of race and colour received greater attention. They were seen as the basis for the dehumanisation of the black race through centuries of slave trade and colonization of people of the continent. But the new model of the Church-as-Family, emphasize integration, reconstruction, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice and peace on the basis of our common origin in the One True God and salvation in Christ.

Consequently, considering all the factors, the theologians who are protagonists of this model of ecclesiology of the Church-as-Family, wish that the unity in diversity or rather ecclesial communion be interpreted dynamically, so that their young churches could inculturate the Gospel in their cultures and develop new forms of Christian living, worship, and thought that are relevant to their people and at the same time in communion with the long tradition and theological expressions of the universal Church-Family. In so doing, the African local churches will be enabled, not only to remain faithful to the common faith in the work of inculturation, but also to communicate to the other particular churches outside Africa and to the whole church their own experiences of God’s grace operating in their particular socio-cultural contexts.

It is within this scenario that we find the significance of the critical issues raised by some African theologians like John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, Lamin Sanneh, Engelbert Mveng, among others, about the place of Africa in the new southward shift of Christian landscape. For these African theologians, one major lesson of the new southward shift in the Christian landscape is that it is in keeping with the history of Christian expansion. It follows from this insight that Christianity in its historical expansion has always reflected the tremendous diversity and dynamism of the peoples of the world. According to Lamin Sanneh, the history of Christian expansion and adaptability enabled Christianity itself to break the cultural barriers of its former domestication in the North Atlantic world to create missionary resurgence and renewal that transformed the religion into a world faith. Today, attitudes must shift to acknowledge this new situation. There is much to be gained by it. Modern African Christianity provides us with an indispensable example of what is at stake. Thus, African theologians see this new southward “shift” as a sign that Christianity is really becoming the world religion which it is meant to be. According to John Mbiti (who is a seminal voice of this perspective), the southward shift signals the birth of new centres of Christianity’s universality. But Mbiti was quick to add that the southward shift in Christian landscape has presented us with two realities that are in sharp contrast, almost contradiction. While on the one hand, the church has become universal in a literal, geographical sense, thanks to the great missionary movement of the last 200 years, on the other, theological outreach has not matched this expansion. For Mbiti, this is a serious dilemma, and if we do not resolve it, it will destroy our

foundations as the church in the world. Thus, he suggests that as the church becomes worldwide, as it affirms the universality for which God's dispersal of history has destined it, theology must strain its neck to see beyond the horizon of our traditional structures, beyond the comforts of our ready-made methodologies of theologizing. For Mbiti, this means that our theology should be with the church where it is, rubbing shoulders with human beings whose conditions, outlook, concerns, and worldviews are not those with which we are familiar. He opines that the dichotomy between older and younger churches, between Western Christianity and the Christianity of the southern continents, is a real one, but it is also a false dichotomy. We can overcome this false dichotomy if we really want to. The background for overcoming it, according to Mbiti, lies on our preparedness to embark on theological pilgrimages. Theologians from the new (or younger churches) have made their pilgrimages to the theological learning of older churches. They had no alternative. But it has been in a sense, one-sided theology.

Therefore, the new southward shift in Christianity challenges us to embark on pilgrimage of true theological reciprocity and mutuality. Because, as it is now, it is only one side that knows the other side fairly well, while the other side either does not know or does not want to know the first side. Mbiti concludes, thus that "there cannot be theological conversation or dialogue between North and South, East and West, until we can embrace each other's concerns and stretch to each other's horizons. Theologians from the southern continents believe that they know about most of the constantly changing concerns of older Christendom. They would also like their counterparts from the older Christendom to come to know about their concerns of human survival."

While Mbiti discusses theological pilgrimage as a viable step in confronting the dichotomy between the older and the younger churches, Kwame Bediako returns to the original concept of Christianity's universality in the new centres of the faith in southern continents. For Bediako: "By becoming a non-Western religion ... Christianity has also become a true world faith." Wherever the faith has been transmitted and assimilated are equally "centres of Christianity's universality." This is not to deny that there have been (and the modern Western world is not the first of these) instances of Christian recession. Bediako argues further that the new shift does not mean that the old centres of Christianity are no longer functioning or that the church has become sterile there. No. Rather what is being emphasized is that it is important that a shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity is precisely what it is supposed to. It is a pointer to the nature of the faith and much less to the significance of human agencies of its transmission. "Any absolutisation of the pattern of Christianity's transmission should consequently be avoided and the nature of Christian history itself be re-examined ... Since it is on the basis of the experience of faith in the living Christ in the Christian communities of the South that we speak of the present shift, it also signifies that there is no one centre from which Christianity radiates, and that it was never intended to be so." The universal relevance of the church's missionary experience in the Christian communities of the southern communities comes, then, to consist in this – "the great things that God has done." This view is also the answer to those scholars who have doubted whether the cross-cultural learning that Christian communities of the southern continent projects, can assist in mission to the modern secularized societies.

The point here is that the concept of Christendom imprisons the study of non-Western Christianity within a Western theological framework and thus impoverishes understanding of its nature and significance. It entrenches the notion of Christian missionary movement as one-way

traffic, as a movement from the “Old Christendom” to the so-called “non Christian land.” The missionary significance as well as the real Christian identity of Christians from the former “non-Christian land” or (“mission land”) is thus suppressed by the concept of “Christendom.” Moreover, the experience of Christendom perhaps predisposes Westerners to think of religious phenomena in terms of permanent centre and structures of unilateral control.

If the previous theological reflections on these issues have been touchy and emotional, the model of the Church-as-Family (as being advanced by African theologians) and of the African churches as among the “new centres of Christianity’s universality”, bring us to the central thing in the history of Christian mission. They also point to the question of our redemption in Christ as the main reason for the call for integration and reconciliation of human family in the Trinitarian model. The model of the Church-as-Family, in particular, addresses the glaring reality of divisions among the different religious and ethnic nationalities in various African states. It addresses with equal strength, the enduring scandals of racial discrimination against the Africans at the global level. It is said that slavery and colonialism might have ended officially, but racism has not. In other words, these African interpretations or models of the church and Christian community have also the aim of announcing the good news that in Christ, the damaged African humanity and dignity through slavery and colonialism have been restored. To deny this fact is to negate what God has done for us in Christ. It is to negate the gospel teaching of salvation of all nations in Christ. It is to continue to live in the old world of racial ideologies and stereotypes with all its contradictions to the gospel message.

African Liberation Theology: African liberation theology has a broader perspective and exhibit variety of method. The theology endeavours to integrate the theme of liberation in the rest of the African cultural background and socio-political and economic spheres. It discusses the oppressive socio-cultural structures inherited from traditional society, the modern socio-political and economic systems, and emancipation from other forms of oppression such as disease, poverty, hunger, ignorance, and the subjugation of women. At its early beginning, the following were identified as currents of the theology of liberation in Africa: African Liberation theology (as developed in the then independent part of Africa before the demise of Apartheid in South Africa and political independence of former Portuguese colonies of Mozambique, Angola, etc.), African Women's liberation theology, and South African Black theology. Advocates of African theology of liberation include: Jean-Marc Éla, Engelbert Mveng, and Elochukwu Uzukwu, Kwame Bediako, among others. For lack of space, our analysis of African liberation theology in this essay is limited to Éla’s theology since he could be regarded as the most representative of theologians of the liberation theology. A Catholic Priest and theologian from Cameroun, among his most important works on this theme are his two magnum opus: *African Cry* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986); and *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995).

The starting point of Éla’s theology is on the relationship that should exist in works of inculturation and liberation in Africa. Hence, he is critical of an African theology that bases its concern mainly on anthropological and cultural problems, as if African society and churches “can achieve their identity by considering only anthropological and cultural problems.” In his view, such pre-occupation with cultural identity could be a dangerous alibi, so as to ignore the more burning issues in contemporary Africa. What is needed instead, according to him, is an inculturation which is relevant to the culture that is being born out of daily struggles of Africans for survival. In a sense, Éla is advocating a mid-way between inculturation and liberation theologies in Africa.

In this context, Éla refers to what he calls the tensions that mark the life of ordinary African Christians. He asked the fundamental question: “After over a century of missionary work in the continent, how many Africans feel really at home in the church?” He contends that many ethnic groups in Black Africa embraced the Christian faith after a long and somewhat muffled resistance. “What is certain is that in many African countries Christians are defined above all as people who had to abandon their traditional customs. In fact, a person exists as a Christian in a “Church”, which, despite its catechism and sacraments, really amounts with no real influence on social problems. Because the Christianity of missionaries supplies no answers to the difficulties of daily life, Christians continue to follow the traditions of their villages or districts.” This ambivalence, Éla contends, is the source of many tensions that mark the people. Such situations have consequences, including the proliferation and strong influence of sects among young people confused about the future, and the polite indifference of African intellectuals who view Christianity as an out-of-date religion in a world come of age. “These factors should force the church to re-examine its faith and its presence in African society, or else Christianity will be seen as a religion only for women and children.” In the opinion of Éla, the African situation as it is today requires that we pay a double “regard” or take a hard look of our history as a people. Such a double “view” of the past and the future requires fidelity to the past, to our “dangerous” memories (J.B. Metz) and our pathetic and heroic memories. It also involves creativity to make new paths into the future with hope and optimism. This creativity is what Éla calls the “ethics of transgression” for the sake of epistemological rupture.” Such creativity led him to articulate theologically his pastoral experience with the Kirdi people of Tokombèrè village in northern Cameroun and turn it into a theological paradigm. He extrapolated from it a theology of revelation that takes seriously God’s self-communication in history and a theology of salvation as liberation in the name of God’s kingdom of peace and justice.

With that Éla was able to create a new story, an African story in Christian theology and pastoral praxis. He triumphed over the warning of what the Nigerian author and novelist, Chimamanda Adichie calls “The Danger of a Single Story.” According to Chimamanda Adichie, the modern story of Africa is always replete with a single story. The African poverty is the single story. A single story of catastrophe: “In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to their *foreign counterparts*, in any way. No possibility of feeling more complex than pity. No possibility of a connection as human equals.” But it is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another, but to make it the definitive story of that person, the simplest way to do it is to tell the single story over and over again. A single story creates stereotypes. But one major problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. The single story robs people of dignity; it makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar. But assuming that you start the start from the bottom up, you will have a different story. What the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls “a balance of stories.” Start the story with the failure of the African nation-states, and not with the colonial creation of the African states, and you have an entirely different story. When we listen to another story, especially, from the bottom up, we regain what the American author Alice Walker calls “a kind of paradise.”

However, in the thinking of Éla, this is the scenario the local church in Africa is called upon to address today in its missionary endeavours. In other words, the urgent need to rethink the local church’s social role for Africa’s regeneration arise not so much out of a ready-made solution or theories, but from what Éla himself calls the “shock” of the gospel in Africa”: the “co-existence of the gospel in Africa with the Veritable Empire of injustice and hunger.” For Éla, the shock which the local church might have experienced through its pastoral experience was the realization that even though a greater part of *Africa* is a deeply and massively Christian region, “it tends to remain a

veritable empire of hunger.” He asks the question: how could the local church co-exist with such a situation without “shocking” it with the gospel? In his writings, Éla captures various angles of this “shock” as he describes the frustration, the apparently meaningless existence, the extreme and paralyzing poverty, the violation of basic human rights, the colonial and neo-colonial violence, the multinational exploitation, as well as hunger experienced by the people. It is this “rough ground” that, according to Éla, provides the unique context and challenge for Christianity and theology in Africa today: “our practice of Christian faith faces a major challenge from African men and women who agonize over where their next meal is coming from.”

Furthermore, the problem, as Éla notes, does not arise out of lack of commitment by rural populations, which can be easily addressed through moral and spiritual motivation. Rather, the problem has to do with a social system “which has not been restructured from bottom up to respond to the social needs of the majority.” Elsewhere he notes, “Food shortages result not so much from natural calamities as from the policies of an economic model that is (totally) oriented toward the outside world and abandons the most important part of the population.” Similarly, the health, medical, and educational systems are set up in such a way that only an elite minority benefit. As a result, a gulf grows between the living standard of the comfortable minority of the “haves” and that of the disinherited majority of the “have-nots.” He notes: “We must be aware of health problems in a context where African leaders dream of matching the pomp and luxury of the “Élysée” in France, while their people are sinking in the misery of huts and make-shift housing. On national holidays barrels of champagne are drunk in African capitals while millions of families lack drinking water and are condemned to live with parasite diseases that weaken their constitution and slow down agricultural development.”

One would have expected that Éla could have developed a political system that could address the political scene he so described in his writings. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Africa is tired of a liberation theology that begins with and ends only in lamentations and criticism without showing a way of getting out of the jungle. A new challenge to African theology is to develop a constructive theological thinking towards rebuilding African socio-political reality. This was the subject of discussion of the Ugandan theologian, Emmanuel Katongole in his recent book entitled: *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 2010). The issues Katongole discussed in his book, have also dominated the debate among the proponents of African theology of reconstruction.

African Theology of Reconstruction: This is a new trend in African theology. It is still in its infancy stage. The beginning of the 1990s was characterized by positive changes both at the African and international levels. It was the end of the Cold War in which African countries had been caught up for decades. The end of the Cold War marked the end of communism. Before that, Africa had been a battlefield where the capitalist bloc and the communist bloc were fighting for geopolitical strategies and control of African natural and mineral resources. It was also the end of Apartheid in South Africa and the independence of Namibia, Zimbabwe as well as Mozambique and Angola. The fall of communism and the beginning of democracies in Africa was welcomed as a time for *African renaissance*. This international political situation called for a new theological response in Africa. Prior to 1990 African theology was mainly motivated by a struggle for African cultural identity and liberation from Western colonial and neo-colonial exploitation of the continent. With the new wind of change the African Church felt the call to positively respond to this new situation which was for many a sign of hope. Also the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in South

Africa was significantly important for Africa. Mandela had been in prison for 27 years. He was released on February 11, 1990.

In November (9-16, 1991), the All Africa Council of Churches (AACC) met in Mombassa (Kenya) to reflect on the adequate response of the church in the post-apartheid era. The Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, then President of the AACC, asked the Kenyan theologian Mugambi to reflect on the theological implications of African the changing situation in the Southern part of Africa and in Africa in general. The Mombassa meeting issued a document: *The Church of Africa: Towards a Theology of Reconstruction*. Mugambi became the architect of this shift in African theology. As Innocent H. Maganya noted, it can be questionable if one should speak in terms of shift from previous theological emphases to the reconstruction paradigm. As the themes of inculturation and liberation come back often in the writings of the proponents of the theology of reconstruction. It would be better to speak of a “new liberation theology” or a new awareness of the role of theologians in the transformation of the society. However, Mugambi’s theology of reconstruction was first articulated into a book: *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War*. This book was published in 1995. Since then Mugambi has received some constructive remarks which brought him to publish another volume on reconstruction under the title: *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi 2003). Charles Villa-Vicencio (of South Africa), reflecting on the meaning of the events in the context of South Africa, proposed a theology of reconstruction based on the respect of laws and human rights. He called the church to take part in the building of a new South Africa. Villa-Vicencio later published these points in his book: *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights*. Among the guests of the Mombassa venue was Kä Mana (from the Democratic Republic of Congo), who also has written a lot on the reconstruction. Among his books, we can only mention: *L’Afrique va-t-elle mourir: Bousculer l’imaginaire africain. Essai d’éthique politique* (Cerf, Paris 1991). Kä Mana proposes a model of reconstruction of Africa based on the theology of resurrection and salvation in Christ. He appeals to the model of the Egyptian mythology of *Isis* and *Osiris* – their struggles for life and rebuilding of existence, and of the model of the life-death-resurrection of Christ event. From these two distinct backgrounds, Kä Mana proposes a new society that passes from political ethics to Christological ethics and politics. The Christians of today are called to articulate in public domain, Jesus Christ as the horizon of our existence or as he before whom one is to reconstruct the humanity. The theology of reconstruction comes with the challenge of what to do between the place of the logic of market economy and the logic of love as manifested by Christ. In this regard, the reconstruction of Africa must begin with the principles of structuring of our social consciousness: The dictatorships of the belly, of alienation and powerlessness, are the arena from which the struggle for the future must begin. What is at stake, is changing these realities and introducing a new way of thinking, to promote an “Africa” which is responsible for its own destiny. It is neither optimism nor pessimism but a desire for hope in the building of a new society.

With the Mombassa meeting, a new orientation in African theology among the Protestants was launched. It was the launching of theology that puts special emphasis on the social transformation of the continent. Advocates of the African theology of reconstruction have called for a stop to the theology of identity and cultural consciousness among the African authors. Time had come to make a shift from liberation to reconstructive transformation of Africa. Incarnation and liberation were seen as not sufficiently adequate to address the new social and political situation in

Africa. In the view of the theologians of reconstruction, both inculturation and liberation responded to a situation of ecclesiastical and colonial bondage which no longer obtains. In place of the inculturation – liberation paradigm, which was mainly “reactive” we should install a “proactive” theology of reconstruction. Instead of being preoccupied with the ascendancy of liberation over inculturation or vice versa – a matter which is still of great debate in African theology, advocates of theology of reconstruction call for an innovative transcendence of both. It is interesting to see that there is nothing on the theme from the side of Catholic theologians, except the latest work of Jean-Marc Éla: *Repenser la Théologie Africaine* (2003). His work is not directly dealing with the theme of reconstruction but joins Mugambi in the sense that there was a crisis in the hermeneutics of African theology which was calling for a new way of doing theology in Africa.

Mugambi, Villa-Vicencio and Kä Mana are so far the leading theologians in the field of Reconstruction. But since then others have studied their works and have brought constructive remarks to the development of this new paradigm. Among these figures is Tinyiko Maluleke. He questions the wisdom of advocates of reconstruction theology of asking Africans to forget their past history and culture in order to face the new challenges? For Maluleke, authors of theology of reconstruction appear to jump too quickly from Egypt to Canaan, from exile to post-exile, skipping the meandering and the long journey in the wilderness. African continent and peoples have spent a long time in the wilderness since the beginning of the modern era. Any African theology that skips this experience or that asks the African people to forget their past and historical experience in the rush to reconstruct and rebuild in the emerging realities miss an essential point in the contextual reality of Africans as well as a key methodological.

Valentin Dedji from Cameroun has also made some constructive remarks in his study of works of the leading proponents of African theology of reconstruction. In a work with the title: *Reconstruction and Renewal in African Theology*, Dedji is critical of the contribution of the following “Reconstructionists”: Mugambi, Kä Mana, Éla and Bediako. He finds that all these four African theologians have a common interest. Dedji’s work is interesting. He says that the crucial issue today in Africa is that of gospel and justice rather than gospel and culture. Dedji calls for a theology of reconstruction which gives priority to biblical motifs such as reconstruction, forgiveness and repentance. Though Dedji does not develop these themes in link with reconstruction theology as such, however, he has brought out important themes for Africa of today which are lacking in the works of Mugambi, Kä Mana and Villa-Vicencio. The themes of reconciliation, justice and peace received some attention in the two volumes recently edited by a Nigerian Jesuit theologian, A.E. Orobator. The volumes are: *Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: The Second African Synod* (2011), and *Theological Re-imagination: Conversations on Church, Religion, and Society in Africa* (2014). The first volume was a collection of essays on the theme of the Second Synod of Bishops for Africa which was held in Rome in 2009. The essays published in this volume depict not only how the theme of reconciliation, justice and peace have started to take a central place in the pastoral concerns of the African Bishops but also in the writings of African theologians as well. The second volume is a collection of papers given at the Year 1 (2013/14) African Theological Colloquium held at Hekima College, Nairobi, on the theme: “African Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Identity and Profile, Contexts, and Models.” In his introduction to this volume, Orobator speaks of a new way of doing theology that is emerging today in Africa.

In these two volumes, references were often made to the conversational and communicative styles in African cultures, which are recently captured in the writings of some African scholars with the word, *palaver*. The term palaver was recently introduced into philosophical, ethical, and theological discourse by Francophone African scholars as a model to discuss and seek solutions to challenging issues, especially in the areas of reconciliation, justice, peace, and forgiveness. For the African scholars, palaver means the art and discipline of public discourse within a participative assembly in a public space, in an open courtyard or under a tree. It involves the use of simple words in order to tackle problematic issues touching on all areas of life and to seek relevant and workable solutions. Palaver takes the name “African palaver model” to depict that communicative community spirit, the interactive dialogue that animates many African community’s affairs for holistic interventions on issues of life and the maintenance of relationships within the entire hierarchy of existence. The palaver model has been and is still the medium and process where individual and community life issues are discussed, researched, cultivated, nurtured and actuated in many African communities. It is an appropriate community model to resolve contradictions among people and strengthen mutual links of solidarity among all members of the community. Through the word, the African traditional communities are able to discuss public affairs, resolve conflicts and create judicial acts that are efficacious in confronting present and future community problems.

As a relatively new concept in philosophical and theological circles, scholars in different disciplines have tried to elaborate upon its profound significance. For some, palaver is merely useless, meaningless talk that occurs in market places or in the streets, with little or no practical consequences. For some others, especially, those who have mechanical orientation of life and calculate it in monetary terms, it is a waste of valuable time. However, in the African context, palaver has a deeper meaning and significance. According to Richard K. Chelimo, palaver, should be differentiated from a mere family or community meeting. Palaver is invoked on rare occasions to deal with very serious family or community issues, and it is open to all people. Thus, it is unlike a meeting which is convoked by the head of the family or the chief to inform on a specific issue touching the family or community. Meetings are informative and limited in nature, while palaver goes deeper, looking for root causes and involving lively discussions and binding resolutions. Palaver is not led by the chief but by a council of elders, people who are well known, respected and knowledgeable about issues of communal life. In the palaver discourse the chief participates actively like every other community member and gives his views as any other active community member. The chief’s power comes into force when the elders and the whole assembly have agreed on the way forward over an issue in the palaver assembly. The chief uses his authority to confirm the common position on the issue at hand to safeguard and implement the deliberations. He does this with the assistance from all the community members, who are the primary custodians of the community values. According to Laurenti Magesa, palaver could be described as a constant fellowship of African sages, leading the community towards the realization of harmonious relationships and ethical norms that protect and promote life in all its complexity.

Thus, for Orobator, African palaver seems the most theological fertile for the theological re-imagination already on the way in the continent. This is because, according to Orobator, African theological enterprise has since shed its self-imposed innocence and *naïvete* that once reduced it to merely aping theological models and answers fabricated for overseas context and consumption. If one needs proof of Africa’s theological maturity, he simply goes to compare his notes with those from

oversea contexts. However, with the emerging theological palaver conversation among the African theologians themselves, that era of doing theology in Africa by proxy seems to be coming to an end. And as this essay has shown, the works of African authors which we have studied demonstrate the creativity of theological imagination in Africa with theologians themselves asking their own questions and discovering their own answers. This is the result of African palaver style of theologizing which, on its own, has started characterizing the journey of theological reflection in the continent today.

Conclusion

Today, African theologians are urged to minimise the conflict which exist between the proponents of the three dominant trends, namely, inculturation, liberation and reconstruction. This is in keeping with the theologians' idea of an integrative African theology. It is a theology that pays attention to issues of social transformation of Africa as it grapples with the question of faith commitment in the continent. Viewed from that perspective, the strength of African theology lies on the fact that it seeks to match theoretical and academic elaboration with social and practical commitment. This is what is going to make the difference in the future.

Bibliography:

- Bénèzet Bujo & Juvénal Ilunga Muya (eds), *African Theology: The Contribution of the Pioneers* (3 Vols.), Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2003, 2006 & 2013.
- Francis Anekwe Oborji, *Trends in African Theology since Vatican II: A Missiological Orientation* (2nd edition), Rome: Leberit Press, 2005.
- Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*, Oxford: University Press, 1992.
- Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986.
- Rosino Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology*, London: SCM Press, 1994.

Note on Contributor:

Francis Anekwe Oborji, a Nigerian diocesan priest, is professor of missiology at the Pontifical Urban University in Rome. He is a founding officer of the International Association of Catholic Missiologists (IACM), and author of *Concepts of Mission: The Evolution of Contemporary Missiology* (Orbis 2006).