

POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN THEOLOGY IN KABASELE LUMBALA

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[The author examines various trends and methodological developments in African Christian theology, particularly processes of “ordering” and subsequently “disordering” as a particularly African theological method. His framework suggests that colonialists and theologians shared a common purpose, namely ordering, and as a result, theology and colonialism developed related methodologies of ordering knowledge. In the postcolonial era a process of theological disordering is taking place led, among others, by François Kabasele Lumbala and his conception of the body within African liturgical theology.]

THE INITIAL DEVELOPMENT of African theology as a particular body of research and writing coincided with the processes of independence from colonialism by many African nations in the mid-20th century.¹ Further writings were triggered by the missionary churches' reflection on gospel and culture, the influence on the African Catholic Church provided by the Second Vatican Council, and the challenges to Christianity by the growing number of independent churches in the continent.

Within Christianity in Africa three types of theology became recognizable: mission theology, African theology, and black theology (South African theology). Within those theologies, two themes became central: the relation between theology and politics and between theology and African culture.² However, the diversity of African theologies provided a commonality of purpose, i.e. the search for an African Christianity that could be expressed through an African liturgy and communal life. Such African

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¹ Ghana (Gold Coast) became independent in 1955, Tanzania in 1961, Kenya in 1963.

² John Parratt, “Introduction,” in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt (London: SPCK, 1987) 4.

Christianity would be the result of an ongoing theological reflection on the biblical text, the African cultural context, and the many African expressions of Christian churches and Christianity in general. As a result, a diversity of African theologies responded to different moments of social life, and developed into a theological rainbow, where the totality clearly provided a visible phenomenon of theological action and reflection, by using multiple methodologies. It is no longer possible to talk about an African theology but African theologies, i.e., theological works that have arisen out of the reflection on African realities provided by well-educated clergy or committed Christians with high levels of literacy and intellectualism.

In this article I examine some contemporary trends and methodological developments in African Christian theology, particularly processes of “ordering” and subsequently “disordering” as a particularly African theological method, so as to assist understanding the historical background to which theologian François Kabasele Lumbala is responding. Kabasele Lumbala, a Catholic priest from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaïre), studied in Paris and completed doctorates in liturgy from the Institut Catholique and in religious studies from the Sorbonne. He now teaches at the Catholic Faculty of the University of Kinshasa and at the theological seminary of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Following John Mbiti’s distinctions, I explore the subject of written African theologies, rather than “oral theology” or “symbolic theology.”³ I suggest that colonialists and theologians shared a common purpose, of ordering. As a result, theology and colonialism developed related methodologies of ordering knowledge. During colonialism, a complex science of ordering territories and peoples was developed. Such ordering included Western education as a system of ordering minds, bodies, and souls according to the models used in Europe.

In challenging such a given theological system with a European cultural background African theologians used an initial process of disordering. The search for new theological concepts within Africa can thus be considered and will be explored here as a process of disordering. Through such a process European-based philosophical and theological ideas were contested and later re-phrased and re-ordered. Theologians such as Charles Nyamiti have suggested a model of adaptation of European theologies and a theology from above based on the possibility of contextualizing theological formulas and the development of European theology within Africa. Kabasele Lumbala on the contrary has suggested that it is through the

³ John Mbiti, “The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology,” in *African Theology en Route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17–23, 1977, Accra, Ghana*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979) 84.

communal celebration of the liturgy that theologies from below and localized narratives of faith are constructed. Theological truths and contextual assumptions encounter each other in a disorderly manner.

Within that cycle of contemporary order and disorder, clearly African cultural ideas of society and self have been central as methodological tools for the processing of ordering theology in an African context. African ideas related to history and the Christian history of salvation, community and communion, ancestors and kin, sacraments and sacramentals, signs and symbols have challenged the idea of a God who was not present or was not working in Africa before the arrival of colonial officers and missionaries.

In my first part, I explore colonial representations of peoples seen as needing conversion, the idea of the peoples without history, and the process of colonizing the mind. In my second part, I explore some foundational assumptions proposed by African theologians immediately after the colonial period. In my third part, I explore the use of a nonlinear history by African theologians in order to develop a theological paradigm that runs parallel to the history of Christianity in Europe. In my final part, I examine the Christocentric paradigm of the world of the living and the dead, emphasized by Nyamiti and Kabasele Lumbala, in order to suggest that contemporary African theologies have provided a localized theological order, basically Christocentric, and centered in community rituals. It is within those communal rituals that the theological work of Kabasele Lumbala makes sense.

Eventually, such order will have, once again, to be challenged and made disorderly. However, such African gnosis currently connects European Christian practices with African ones, through a process of ongoing relatedness. Gnosis explained as “seeking to know, inquiry, methods of knowing, investigation, and even acquaintance with someone” differs from doxa, and from episteme as “both science and general intellectual configuration.”⁴

I suggest that the use of African historiography, African social history, and African philosophy has provided a central epistemological paradigm

⁴ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1988) ix. Gnosis in a more general way has also been used in the study of a particular religious movement, Jamaa, and its transmission of knowledge, see Johannes Fabian, “An African Gnosis,” *History of Religion* 9 (1969); *Jamaa: A Charismatic Movement in Katanga* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, 1971), “Jamaa: A Charismatic Movement Revisited,” in *Religion in Africa: Experience & Expression*, ed. Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E.A. van Beek and Dennis L. Thomson (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann 1994). The Jamaa movement was founded by a Belgian missionary Placide Tempels and it is probably the first attempt at an African Christianity with its proper theological system and narrative.

for an ongoing future development of African theologies. As the lives of peoples in Africa continue changing, such historical paradigms will create a firm grounding for theological models that will develop further understandings of the presence of God through the Christian communities in Africa.

THE ORDERING OF MINDS

Valentin Mudimbe has suggested that colonialism was a science of ordering implemented by explorers, colonial administrators, and missionaries. European explorers aimed at filling the gaps within maps of Africa, and indeed of the world, that remained blank and unknown. In the name of monarchical states, explorers searched for rivers and forests with incomplete maps that centered the world in Europe, where civilization and culture existed. Once explorers had reported on what they had found, i.e. lakes, rivers, mountains, and peoples within them, colonial administrators were sent to take possession of lands that remained, according to Europeans, without owners, uncivilized, and untamed.

As a result, the colonial machinery became fascinated by the diversity of peoples and by the fact that nothing much was known about them. Since the promulgation of the bull *Inter caetera* (1493) by Pope Alexander VI, the mandate to overthrow paganism and to establish the Christian faith in pagan nations had been implemented by Christian European kings. *Dum diversas* (1452) and *Romanus pontifex* (1455) had granted the king of Portugal the right to embrace Muslims, pagans, enemies of Christ, and Africans in general as his subjects and possession. The Reformers' challenge to the pope's instructions was quickly followed by the application of European principles of religious practice, namely *cuius regio, eius religio*.

Africa like other territories was considered *terra nullius*, and the scramble of Africa in 1895 followed former practices. Those departing for Africa occupied territories by taking them as possession of kings, by ordering them, and by bringing Christian faith and European knowledge to those who did not have it. The Christian revival of the 19th century followed the end of the age of Enlightenment with its criticism of religion, and following the First Vatican Council, theological doctrines within Catholicism were reordered. Missionaries followed the theological paradigms of the 19th century by sending personnel to save souls and to build up the kingdom of God. The "cursed continent" of Africa was also called to be an orderly part of a Church associated with monarchies and with God's plan of salvation, e.g. *Interior Africa solemnis gaudii proximi Ecclesiae triumpho particeps fiat* (the interior of Africa may participate in the solemn coming joy of the Church's triumph).⁵ The Church was implanted, built, and in

some cases flourished within peoples that in many cases associated missionaries with colonial functionaries. Towns were built that included a colonial administrative center and a church or Christian mission.

However, within such missionary expansion justified by the mandate given by monarchs and in the case of the Catholic monarchies by the pope, missionary education became central to the colonial paradigm of ordering. Religious instruction was central in the mission schools. However, the ways to be Christian taught at the mission schools were European; to become an educated Christian was to acquire European dress and a European way of behavior.

Those educated in mission schools were taught European history and the Christian history of salvation. As a result “dark Africa” remained a continent without a past, while the peoples of Africa remained “peoples without history.” Such assumption of the absence of any African history was supported by European philosophers such as Hegel, who overemphasized the centrality and primacy of the European self in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.

For Hegel, world history is the self-realization of God (a theodicy), reason, and freedom, a process toward enlightenment, “the development of the consciousness that the Spirit has of its freedom and also the evolution of the understanding that the Spirit obtains through such consciousness.”⁶ Thus, for Hegel, development (*Entwicklung*) determines the movement of a concept (*Begriff*) into an idea.⁷ However, universal history moves from East to West, so that “Europe is the absolute end of Universal History.”⁸

The influence of Hegel and Kant cannot be overlooked. Thus, Hegel’s assessment of Africa’s development in history and the realities of the Spirit among Africans can come as a shock to contemporary readers. Hegel writes: “Africa is in general a closed land, and this maintains its fundamental character.”⁹ And further, “The realm of the Absolute Spirit is so impoverished among them [the Africans] and the natural Spirit so intense that any representation which they are inculcated with suffices to impel them to respect nothing, to destroy everything . . . Africa does not have

⁵ O. Bimwenyi, *Discours théologique négro-africain: Problèmes de fondements* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1981), cited in V.Y. Mudimbe, *Invention* 46.

⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1955) 167.

⁷ Here I borrow and I follow Enrique Dussel’s Frankfurt Lectures, whose introduction is reproduced as “Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures),” in *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*, ed. John Beverley, José Oviedo and Michael Aronna (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 1995) 65–76.

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, “Lectures” in *Werke* 243.

⁹ *Ibid.* 212.

history as such. Consequently we abandon Africa, to never mention it again. It is not part of the historical world; it does not evidence historical movement or development”¹⁰

As a result of such writings, oral African histories and any African past were overruled by European social mores and their primacy, while Christian attitudes conflicted enormously with localized African customs and beliefs about the world and the action of God in the world. The colonization of African minds was at the center of the educational system and with few exceptions newly converted African Christians were expected to think differently than other Africans and to behave in different cultural ways.

The absence of history assigned to Africa by Europeans tried to erase the long-standing process of African gnosis, in order to replace cosmological systems of social and religious knowledge with a European episteme. Christianity in its European cultural form produced a religious discourse that followed an epistemological fallacy. Such a fallacy, that the continent of Africa had not encountered or responded to Christianity in the past, could not be sustained historically. The history of Africa included the presence of Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine in North Africa and the rapid development and establishment of Christianity in Ethiopia.¹¹

Thus, in the view of Mudimbe, history as “an intellectual effort of ordering human activities and social events chronologically,” is also “a discourse of knowledge and a discourse of power.”¹² In the words of Michel Foucault, history has the “project of bringing man’s consciousness back to its real condition, of restoring it to the contents and forms that brought it into being, and elude us within it.”¹³ Michel de Certeau observed: “In history, which leads from the subject of mysticism in the 16th century to the subject of economics, primitive man lies between the two. As a cultural (or even epistemological) figure, he prepares the second by inverting the first, and, by the end of the 17th century, he is erased, replaced by the native, the colonized, or by the mentally deficient.”¹⁴

Therefore, the first task of a postcolonial independent Africa was a much-needed re-construction of an African history. The independent movements that became part of the newly formed independent African

¹⁰ Ibid. 231–34.

¹¹ Rosino Gibellini, “Introduction: African Theologians Wonder . . . and Make Some Proposals,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994) 1–5; John Parratt, “Introduction,” in *A Reader in African Christianity 1*; Robert J. Schreiter, “Introduction: Jesus Christ in Africa Today,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992) x.

¹² V. Y. Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa* 187.

¹³ M. Foucault as evaluated in *ibid.* 188.

¹⁴ Michel de Certeau, *La Fable mystique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982) 227.

nations of the 20th century stressed the value of African societies, their cosmologies, their customs, their systems of knowledge, their emphasis on community, and their central religious values, practices, and attitudes. The principle of disordering applied to the colonial order was also applied to a European missionary theology. Moreover, for African theologians it is clear that the challenge to European systems of order suggested that the methodologies of ordering used within colonialism had failed to understand the foundations of African societies. Ngindu Mushete, for example, has concluded that: “[o]ne clear fact has obviously escaped western humanity for a long time. It is that there is not *one* world but *many*, not *one* history but *many*, not *one* theology but *many*, not *one* space or milieu but *many* that are different and perhaps even antagonistic.”¹⁵

THE DISORDERING OF THEOLOGY

In this section I explore the critique to missionary theology, theologies of adaptation, and European theology. Within this period, the foundations of what African theology in relation to European missionary and colonial theology could be are established. This period coincides with the end of colonial rule, the rising of economic elites, and neocolonialism in Africa. Central to its understanding are the challenges to colonial missionary activity posed by, among others, the Second Vatican Council and the European restructuring of thought and social action provided by the protests in Paris especially in 1968.

During the colonial period, the emphasis on missionary theology had created a confrontation between European Christianity and African life and rites. Two seminal works provided the first critiques to such state of affairs. A Belgian missionary, Placide Tempels, published in 1945 *Bantu Philosophy*, in which he explored the possibilities of an African view and explanation of the world and of the action of God in such world that would differ from the European one.¹⁶ Following such work, a group of African priests who can be considered the pioneers in African theology produced a collection of essays: *Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent*, through the Paris publication *Présence africaine* (1956). This publication asked questions about inculturation and liberation within Christianity and Africa and challenged the accepted missionary theology of that time, without agreeing completely with a theology of adaptation.

The theology of adaptation became prominent within the first period of

¹⁵ Ngindu Mushete, “The History of Theology in Africa: From Polemics to Critical Irenics,” in *African Theology en Route* 32.

¹⁶ *La Philosophie bantoue* (Elisabethville: Lovania, 1945; Paris: Présence Africaine 1949), English translation *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959).

African theology, a period that chronologically spans from the end of the colonial era to the creation of the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians during 1977 in Accra. A theology of adaptation fostered the possibility of adapting the practice of Christianity in Africa. It was still a Eurocentric perspective, however it moved a step forward from the *terra nullius* ideology applied to Christian churches and their African communities previously. The final statement of African theologians in Accra suggested a resourceful theological reflection that was not trying to adapt European Christian practices to Africa, but came out of a historical reflection on the social and political realities of Africa from the perspective of a Christian commitment. African theologians wrote: "For this we need an interdisciplinary methodology of social analysis, biblical reflection, and active commitment to be with the peoples in their endeavors to build a better society."¹⁷

It is clear that at this junction of its development, a very strong critique toward European thought and toward systematic theology is present in the writings of African theologians who belonged to an already postcolonial and neocolonial world. For example, Kofi Appiah-Kubi suggested that, "[o]ur question must not be what Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, or any other Karl has to say, but rather what God would have us do in our living concrete condition. For too long African Christian theologians and scholars have been preoccupied with what missionary A or theologian B or scholar C has told us about God and the Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁸ However, within that postcolonial period, African theologies recognized that contradictions were present within the postcolonial world of varied epistemes and disorderly gnosis. Sergio Torres, for example, reminded African theologians that: "[w]e belong to the educated class of our countries and easily adopt its style. We live physically in the Third World, but our houses, our books, our way of life, are British, French, American. How many of us actually live with the poor and share their experience? How many of us work with the workers and peasants as companions in the struggle?"¹⁹

Within this period the foundations were provided for a critical African theology. Those methodological assumptions included the following epistemes:

- (1) Theology has a living historical character, so that all theology is culturally and socially positioned. As a result, "the notion of a universal theology, like that of a universal philosophy, is a myth."²⁰

¹⁷ "Final Communiqué," Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17–23, 1977, Accra, Ghana, in *African Theology en Route* 195.

¹⁸ "Preface" in *ibid.* viii.

¹⁹ "Opening Address" in *ibid.* 8.

²⁰ Ngindu Mushete, *History* 29.

- (2) African theological language has its source and foundation in the Bible.²¹ It follows the theological realization of other theologians working in economically undeveloped countries that “a theology that does not act on behalf of the poor and the oppressed is not Christian theology.”²² Within this episteme of an African Christian theology there is no exclusion toward other forms of African theology, such as discourses about God arising out of indigenous religious forms, Islam, or urbanized forms of non-conformist Christianity, such as the wide spread phenomenon of the African independent churches.
- (3) History becomes a tool for theology, history understood in its sacred and secular spheres.²³ In that way, “the God of history speaks to all peoples in particular ways.”²⁴ Such contemporary view of history proposes a history that moves in two spheres of discourse, “the traditional Western canon of history as *res gestae* and the historiography “beneath mere events.” Within this second historical paradigm Africa and its peoples are re-constituted into the starting point of history, rather than the former starting point of missionary and colonial history.²⁵
- (4) African theology has a cultural context, the diverse cosmological world-views of African peoples, societies and nations. In those diverse views, “the whole creation is defined as a life-death conflict.”²⁶
- (5) African cultures are to be recognized as the particular locations for God’s presence. Within those *loci* Africans do not operate a Greek concept of being, as individual, but have a dynamic perception of community, people in relation, not only with the living, but also with the dead, the spiritual beings and the founding ancestors of clans, lineages, and ethnic groups.
- (6) African perception, conceptions, and constructions of space and time are to be recognized as central for the understanding of life and death

²¹ “African Report,” in *Third World Theologies: Commonalities & Divergences*, Papers and Reflections from the Second General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, December, 1986, Oaxtepec, Mexico, ed. K. C. Abrahams (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 49; also John Mbiti, *Biblical Basis*; Kwesi A. Dickson, “Continuity and Discontinuity Between the Old Testament and African Life and Thought,” in *African Theology en Route* 95–108.

²² Sergio Torres, “Opening Address,” in *African Theology en Route* 5. Nevertheless, the theme of the poor and the oppressed within African readings of the Bible has not been as prominent as in Latin America. However, African theologians such as Jean-Marc Éla have explored the political commitment of African theologians outside the South African context.

²³ “Final Communiqué,” in *African Theology en Route* 190.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 193.

²⁵ Ogbu U. Kalu, “Church Presence in Africa,” in *African Theology en Route* 13–14.

²⁶ “African Report,” in K. C. Abraham, ed., *Third World* 51.

and the world where God intervenes. Time is cyclical and not linear, thus “existence and time move in repeated and endless cycles.”²⁷ The spirit world is a mirror of the world of the living and what differentiates the dead from the living is their form of action in society. Thus, the living prepare to join the dead, who do not live in separation from the living. Space is multidimensional, with God and the supreme beings in the sky, patron gods, and nature spirits live on earth and ancestral spirits live in the world beneath. Evil spirits move around the world due to the fact that they did not achieve a peaceful transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead.

- (7) Liturgy or worship is a community activity, where members of such community communicate and keep in touch with the multidimensional spaces through a sacred passage of time. Thus, “worship is an elaborate series of manipulative rituals designed to harness the resources of good deities in order to ward off the machinations of the evil spirits and to control space-time events.”²⁸
- (8) Humanity as present in Africa is defined in the context of community. Just as it has been in traditional religion, humanity is to be conceived as “being in relation.”²⁹ Therefore, individual knowledge and awareness comes from the community. For Africans, life is a life-in-community, and therefore, according to Mercy Oduyoye, “our nature as beings-in-relation is a two-way relation: with God and with our fellow human beings.”³⁰

The search for different ways of asking questions from the social and religious realities of Africa provided comprehensive summaries of the theological task ahead. Interestingly enough, those agendas were communally addressed by theological faculties, pastoral institutes and theological journals.

African Christian theology was written by priests and ministers of religion, while lay people took part more actively in related areas such as the experimentation of liturgical rites and the discussion of missionary theology and that of the basic Christian communities. Some women theologians such as Mercy Oduyoye brought new perspectives on women and their realities in Africa, providing theological discourses on fertility, motherhood, and a feminist critique to an overly male-dominated Christian tra-

²⁷ Ogbu U. Kalu, “Church Presence in Africa: A Historical Analysis of the Evangelization Process,” in *African Theology en Route* 15.

²⁸ Ogbu U. Kalu in *ibid.* 16.

²⁹ Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985) 17.

³⁰ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology,” in *African Theology en Route* 111.

dition in Africa. The process of disordering provided a firm challenge to the former colonialist theology and at the same time gave impetus to further questioning on the possible and still absent relation between African theology and contemporary European bodies of theological writings in the late-20th century.

AN AFRICAN PARADIGM OF HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

When the first written works of African theology started to be published in the 20th century, there were questions posed about the relation between Christianity and the indigenous religions of Africa. If Christianity embodied a particular body of revelation, how was it possible to develop any Christian theology in Africa outside such body. Those who proposed the Christian history of salvation as the only base for African theology, *qua* Christian theology, made a distinction between African Christian theology and the theology of African Traditional Religion.

Muzarewa, for example, makes that clear distinction, suggesting that "African theology is done by Christians for the Church and is based on the Bible, it is Christian theology and differs substantively from *traditional* theology in Africa."³¹ Fasholé-Luke follows the same argument, however he suggests that there is no African theology outside the biblical text.³² However, Mbiti suggests that the use of African Christian theology can be interchanged with African theology.³³ For Agbeti, there is a clear distinction between African Christian theology, and African traditional theology, i.e. Christian theology is Christocentric while traditional African theology is theocentric.³⁴ The relation between both kinds of theology seem to be clearer, as African traditional theology can be perceived as a *praeparatio evangelica*.³⁵

Within all those distinctions that are certainly not a matter of semantics, it is important to recognize that indigenous African traditions and Christian practices are both present within Africa today. Thus, the term African Traditional Religion seems to suggest a static system of beliefs and practices. That is not the case. African indigenous traditions change and respond to concrete contemporary problems of life and death. The same can be said of an inculturated and historical African Christian theology.

³¹ Gwinyai H. Muzarewa, *Origins and Development of African Theology* 78.

³² E. W. Fasholé-Luke, "The Quest for an African Christian Theology," *The Ecumenical Review* 27 (July 1975) 259-69.

³³ John Mbiti, "Some Currents of African Theology," in *African and Asian Contributions to Contemporary Theology: Report*, ed. J. Mbiti (Geneva: Bossey, 1976) 6-17.

³⁴ John K. Agbeti, "African Theology: What It Is," *Presence* 5.5-8.

³⁵ Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, ed. *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1971) 180.

CHRIST AND THE ANCESTORS

Once the issues of an African history as part of salvation history had been cleared, African theologians could proceed to move forward in a more systematic way. Such systematization explored mainly the role of Christ as center of revelation within an African context, however once again recognizing the diversity of African theologies. Robert Schreiter has suggested that such explorations on the person of Christ for African Christianity not only help build an ever-growing body of African theology, but also make “distinct contributions to the understanding of Christ for the whole Church.”³⁶

Within such richness of Christological inculturation, I will examine two African theologians and their theological approximations to the person and role of Christ in Africa. It can be argued that the Christological paradigms of Charles Nyamiti and François Kabasele Lumbala have become prominent in contemporary African theology and have provided two important paradigms in liturgical theology and systematic theology.

Nyamiti has linked a more systematic and dogmatic Christology within the African discourse on Christ and has opened avenues for variety and diversity in African Christology. Kabasele Lumbala has worked his theology from the richness of culture and has asked questions about an African Christology that comes from the Christian experience of community in a particular African locality and that is expressed through liturgical rites as Christological events.

Nyamiti's theology has managed to call to order other theological efforts.³⁷ In fact, if several authors have contributed to the largest area of theological research within Africa, Nyamiti's efforts have challenged their lack of a *nexus mysteriorum*. Thus, if all Christian mysteries are indeed interconnected, Christological research could provide further understanding of one particular mystery in the light of others. For Nyamiti, the central question “Who is Christ for the African?” cannot be properly answered without knowing who Christ is in himself.

Such theological paradigm of interconnection has provided a bridge of dialogue between European Christologies and African ones. As a result, theological assessments of Nyamiti's work have already been published in Europe.³⁸ Those who criticize Nyamiti's work have suggested that he has

³⁶ Robert J. Schreiter, “Introduction: Jesus Christ in Africa Today,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa* ix.

³⁷ Charles Nyamiti, a Catholic priest from Tanzania, studied in Europe and has taught systematic theology at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), formerly the Catholic Higher Institute of East Africa (CHIEA) in Nairobi, Kenya.

³⁸ Mika Vähäkangas, *In Search of Foundations for African Catholicism: Charles Nyamiti's Theological Methodology* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

used traditional theological concepts in order to develop something that comes out of African experience and therefore needs some fresh epistemological concepts in order to expand. The strength of Nyamiti's model though arises out of his sense of a theological tradition and the construction of African theology and Christology as a continuation of a universal theological tradition.

KABASELE LUMBALA'S ANCESTRAL CHRIST

Kabasele Lumbala's model of an African Christ intends to bridge the European division between the human and the sacred, and suggests the vindication of the human as the place where God acts in the world and where the African Christ is likely to appear more meaningful. As in the case of Nyamiti, Kabasele Lumbala's work centers on his own tradition, and he examines the possibility of an African perception of the human in the sacred by way of the celebration of the sacraments.

As noted by commentators outside Africa, most of the African theologians within the Roman Catholic tradition use theological ideas outside their tradition, and have developed an ecumenical theology. Therefore, if Kabasele Lumbala explores the relation between liturgy and inculturation within the Congolese Church and communities, he is effectively suggesting that within such a context the sacraments are celebrated and are requested by the majority of the Congolese population.

Kabasele Lumbala differs from the more universalistic theology of Nyamiti in that he is aiming at a close examination of seven sacraments, i.e. baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, marriage, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, and priestly ordination, within a particular tradition.³⁹ His ordering and disordering aims at providing symbols within the Catholic liturgy that can express the presence of Christ for Africans, as understood by Africans themselves.

Kabasele Lumbala has maintained that it is in the African liturgy and through the worship of localized African communities that indigenous African cultural elements can and must be incorporated. The centrality of such liturgical practice assumes that the theology of inculturation reflects a way of doing theology that comes out of experience, an African experience of the spiritual and material worlds. Such experience is manifested and expressed through the body. It is subsequently lived and written by faith communities that reflect kinship and symbolic networks within a particular social history.

Together with other African theologians, Kabasele Lumbala shares the

³⁹ François Kabasele Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus Christ in Africa: Liturgy & Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998).

experience of having being ordained as a priest in 1974, already after the revision of the new liturgical rites within the Catholic Church. After his ordination he worked at a parish in Cibombo, Zaïre, and later continued his pastoral ministry in Paris for five more years. His doctorates in theology (liturgy, Institut Catholique Paris) and in comparative religion (Sorbonne) provided a grounding for his theological investigations after his studies, but also reflected his own concerns as an African Christian and as a Catholic priest.

Most of his writings have appeared in the French language and it has been through the journal *Concilium* that his ideas have become somewhat known in the English-speaking world.⁴⁰ In some ways he shares the same liturgical centrality provided by Vincent Mulago and his works on symbols and sacraments.⁴¹ In other ways his theoretical use of the body as the place where God and people meet and where cultural gestures and divine communication express an African Christian experience and reflection is unique among African theologians.

However, other African theologians have challenged the centrality of the liturgy suggested by Kabasele Lumbala. For example, Jean-Marc Éla (Cameroon) has noted critically that “while people wallow in misery, we are centring our reflection on religious rites and customs!”⁴² Éla has further suggested that traditional Africa with its rich cultures cannot be used as a contemporary parameter of theological reflection, because it remains in the colonial past. Instead, the situation of oppression and poverty within Africa suggests that liberation is what is needed. Such critique of Kabasele Lumbala’s cultural and liturgical presuppositions reflects another manifestation of a theology of inculturation in Africa, where the postcolonial experience is perceived as a universal challenge to oppression and a theological response of liberation from sin. Such sinful condition is understood

⁴⁰ F. Kabasele Lumbala, “Sin, Confession and Reconciliation in Africa,” *Concilium* 190, 1987 [Mary Collins and David Power, ed., *The Fate of Confession*] 74–81; “Christians and Muslims in Africa,” *Concilium* 1995/3 [Louis-Marie Chauvet and François Kabasele Lumbala, ed., *Liturgy and the Body*] 64–70. Other works in French *Pâques africaines d’aujourd’hui* (Paris: Desclée, 1989); *Symbolique bantoue et symbolique chrétienne: Rencontre dans la liturgie* (Kinshasa, 1991); *Alliances avec le Christ en Afrique: Inculturation des rites religieux au Zaïre* (Paris: Karthala, 1994); and *Liturgies africaines: l’enjeu culturel, ecclésial et théologique* (Kinshasa: Ed. Facultés de Théologie, 1996).

⁴¹ V. Mulago, *Un visage africain du christianisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1965) and *Simbolismo religioso africano: Estudio comparativo con el sacramentalismo cristiano* (Madrid: BAC, 1979).

⁴² Jean-Marc Éla, “Christianity and Liberation in Africa,” in *Paths of African Theology* 137. See *African Cry* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986), and *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

as part of an individual and community, as well as part of society's structural and economic sin as well.

The experience of the South African theologians during apartheid is important here. They certainly challenged the narrative that created an unequal society with the Black majority not being able to access resources.⁴³ However, such reflection was filtered by Christian communities who celebrated their Christian life in the shanty towns and produced South African theologies closer to the North American Black theologies that had confronted inequality in civil rights based on colonial narratives of slavery and Christian White supremacy.⁴⁴

Moreover, in analyzing Kabasele Lumbala's contribution to theology, I assume that the variety of those African theologies and the constant challenge among them comes from the fact that social and religious contexts do change. Those different social and cultural situations can produce different theological emphases due to the fact that the Incarnation of Christ creates a salvific paradigm centered in different histories and moments of that universal history. Thus, addressing Éla's concerns one could say that it is through processes of liberation and their liturgical celebration that God becomes part of an African cultural experience. The concern for inculturation in the liturgy does not exclude, instead it includes, processes of Christian liberation through cultural freedom and the use of contextualized theological paradigms.

Further, the mystery of the Incarnation as portrayed by Kabasele Lumbala requires a certain interest in the milieu that Jesus chose for his life. It was there that the incarnate Word of God transcended Jewish culture, so that according to Kabasele Lumbala "in the Incarnation, God has seen to it that the pathways of humanity converge, but God has done so only by going beyond them, always transcending all models."⁴⁵ As there is no room to understand the Incarnation solely in one cultural setting, there is no doubt that the fact that Africans or any other people can celebrate their

⁴³ See *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Simon S. Maimela, "Man in White Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 36 (1981) 30–41, and "Being a Christian in South Africa," *Concilium* 1992/1 [Giuseppe Alberigo and Alphonse Ngindu Mushete, ed., *Towards the African Synod*] 52–58; Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel* (London: CIIR, 1988); and Charles Villa-Vicencio, ed. *Theology and Violence: The South African Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

⁴⁴ See Simon S. Maimela, *Proclaim Freedom to My People* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1987), and "Black Theology of Liberation," in *Paths of African Theology* 182–95.

⁴⁵ F. Kabasele Lumbala, "Africans Celebrate Jesus Christ," in *Paths of African Theology* 79; see "L'au-delà des modèles," in *Chemins de la christologie africaine*, ed. François Kabasele, Joseph Doré, and René Luneau (Paris: Desclée, 1988).

faith using gestures, symbols, and actions that they understand has already brought a liberating aspect out of such liturgical development.

Such process of inculturation relies in a theological reflection that tries to rediscover the presence of God in the history and customs of Africa. Cultural traits and the creation of an ethno-theology remain central to any process of inculturation. The criticism that “yesterdays’ Africa is no more” contradicts the daily experience of most Africans. They have to deal with sickness and death in terms of indigenous conceptions that depart from Western conceptions of the body, this world and the other, or life and death in general. Regarding the social body, Kabasele Lumbala asserts that human beings are located beings and that Christianity as a way of life cannot exist outside a cultural location.

While politics and economics are certainly part of contemporary Christian concerns by Africans, Kabasele Lumbala prefers the centrality of a liturgical theology over a liberation theology. Such centrality comes from the fact that the African experience of the past has been that when the management of the temporal became the main concern of the Church, “we may doubt the Christian authenticity of the Church.”⁴⁶ A criterion of doubt arises then when church leaders and Christian leaders are seen as too involved in temporal matters. After all, governments can change and economic policies can vary, nevertheless cultural traits within an expanding Christian celebration of life provide continuities, community, and a unity between the material and the spiritual.

Thus, Kabasele Lumbala has strongly suggested that lay Christians should be encouraged to participate in the political world. However, the grounds for such social and economic liberation from poverty and oppression start with the liberation from cultural oppression that was the norm during the colonial period in Africa. Therefore, “the African rituals . . . have introduced into Christian worship a perception of life and the world different from the bottom line of classical Christian theology. This conception is one of a world constructed as a place of participation in life coming from God as the ultimate reality and summit.”⁴⁷

AN INCULTURATED THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

The inculturation of African liturgies has incorporated dances, movements, oral narratives instead of readings, blessings, acclamations, drums, etc. It has been a process that from the outside has provided exciting liturgies with much participation, particularly at the offertory and at the

⁴⁶ F. Kabasele Lumbala, “Africans Celebrate Jesus Christ,” in *Paths of African Theology* 81.

⁴⁷ F. Kabasele Lumbala, *Celebrating* 110.

moment of community acclamations. Nevertheless, African liturgies have also reflected cultural understandings and the voice of Africans themselves who have chosen for example to call Christ a Chief, an Ancestor, and an Elder Brother.⁴⁸

At a theological level, Kabasele Lumbala has suggested that until very recently the body has been repressed. After all, the body constitutes an expression of God, it acts as a mediator of God's life and it constitutes a visible sign of those who are community. In Western philosophy the body and the soul are divided, and therefore in Western theology they remain divided in their liturgical expressions. In such liturgical theology, the body relates to other members of the community during the liturgy, but most of the time the body expresses an individual movement of a single soul toward God and vice-versa.⁴⁹

Instead, within African societies and for contemporary African Christians the body or parts of the body represent a human being. For example, "to save a human being is to save body and soul together. A human being is entirely in a fingernail, a hair, a flake of skin."⁵⁰ In other words, "a human being is a 'signifying body' situated in time and space."⁵¹ Such body is used to break the natural and the supernatural and to mark ritual moments that are sacred because they allow the divine and the human presence to converge in a particular place, in a particular moment, in a particular community.

In those ritual and sacred moments Africans change their daily activities for ritual moments, however they do not become passive recipients of blessings or graces, they become participants of community. The only way they can become participants is by using their bodies, by effecting gestures, by exchanging gifts, by dancing, by clapping, by adorning themselves with colors and substances, by allowing God to speak through signs, symbols, actions, and bodies in community.⁵²

The analysis of different ways of celebrating rites of passage, ritual moments, religious professions, blessings, and sacramentals allows Kabasele

⁴⁸ F. Kabasele Lumbala, "Christ as Chief," and "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa* 103–15, 116–27.

⁴⁹ Theologians in Latin America have also pointed out to the difficulties of an over imposition of Western culture through Christianity, a culture "marked by the logocentrism and individualism of the Greek tradition." Thus, "the official liturgy of the church is strongly marked by the Western experience of a perceived superiority of spirit to matter, a mistrust of the body and its passions, and great restraint in its symbolic expression." See Leonardo Boff, *Good News to the Poor: A New Evangelization* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1992) 42.

⁵⁰ F. Kabasele Lumbala, *Celebrating* 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 5.

⁵² F. Kabasele Lumbala, *Alliances avec le Christ en Afrique: Inculturation des rites religieux au Zaïre* (Paris: Karthala, 1994).

Lumbala to suggest that “Christian liturgy is not a finished book whose pages one turns to find the only valid tones and words. It is history on the move, a history of love that must ceaselessly find the apt gesture, the right word, the pregnant symbol that fit the situation.”⁵³

The challenges of such conceptions aim at a past of liturgical uniformity and missionary education. The body as a recipient of salvation needed to be trained and subdued, so that movements and gestures for prayer reflected European bodies rather than African ones. Orderly bodies were closer to holiness and orderly theological assertions were certainly part of a God that revealed himself through the exact and orderly celebration of the sacraments.

Kabasele Lumbala’s presupposition of diversity provides a complete antithesis of what a pre-Vatican II Church and theology had been. Theological *dicta* came from assumed truths that were to be explained and extended, not from the experience of God’s revelation in the contemporary world through a particular tradition. For Kabasele Lumbala the cultured celebration of rites provides diversity according to a particular context. In his words, “the remote *Deus ex machina* perched on a remote summit has come down and become our partner in a new covenant.”⁵⁴

SACRAMENTS AND SACRAMENTALS

Within his work Kabasele Lumbala develops an ethnography, a descriptive narrative of African rites that were developed after the liturgical encouragement provided by the Second Vatican Council. In his thought, such descriptive chain of liturgical experiments becomes the basis for an ongoing theological reflection on faith and culture. The movement between textual rites and social developments provides an ongoing dynamics in theology that mediates the usual text = liturgy, or the liberation theology paradigm, action = theology.

In that *via media* role, the theology of inculturation becomes central to the experimentation on rites, as particular symbols, gestures, and movements have to be connected with diverse theological understandings related to the celebration of the sacraments. Thus, social life = spiritual life, social action = liturgical rites, and theology of culture = theology of inculturation. Rites created for a particular celebration of the sacraments or created for a particular cultural celebration of a moment of life depend on a dynamic and positive opposition between textual and contextual elements. Those elements are the Roman liturgical texts, particular African gestures and actions, and the theological reflection that mediates between possible opposition in local understandings of faith and culture.

Therefore the theology of inculturation in Kabasele Lumbala requires

⁵³ F. Kabasele Lumbala, *Celebrating* 115. ⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 110.

the centrality of the sacraments attached to Catholic theology, and also the experience of the multicultural by a universal Church that does not describe itself as English, Scottish, Welsh, Congolese, or Rwandan. As a pre-condition to theological multiculturalism, the theological reflection on inculturation cannot be associated with a generative theology that begets liturgical rites, but it can be associated with a *theologia viae mediae*, a medium way of reflection between text and context, between faith and culture. Such *via media* has provided a significant mediation between those who have suggested that there is nothing African about Christian theology, and those European missionaries who have suggested that African indigenous discourses and actions can be fully associated with Christian theology. For the latter, even indigenous ways of praying should be better known “so that they can provide material for a creative African Christian liturgy.”⁵⁵

In the African communities as well as within the globalized Roman Catholic Church, the whole body of the Church via a localized community shapes its life through the communal celebration of the seven sacraments. Already since the Council of Trent those sacraments have been named as baptism, confirmation and Eucharist (sacraments of initiation), reconciliation, marriage, anointing of the sick, and ordination to the priesthood. Thus, in order to conduct those liturgical celebrations texts from the Roman Missal and the Roman Sacramental are used, with the incorporation of contextual and cultural elements associated with life in Africa. Moreover, through the experimental incorporation of some elements and the exclusion of others, an ongoing reflection on faith and culture within the Roman Catholic tradition is further sustained and increased.

Such theological reflection on the inculturation of the sacraments is also complemented by the use of material objects and blessings outside the liturgical celebration of the sacraments that help the sanctification of spaces and ordinary moments in African life, through the so-called sacramentals.⁵⁶ Within those sacramentals the presence of God is signified by the use of cultural elements in order to sanctify human activities and to

⁵⁵ Aylward Shorter, “Prayer in African Cultural Tradition,” in *32 Articles Evaluating Inculturation of Christianity in Africa*, ed. Teresa Okure, Paul van Thiel et al. (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications Spearhead 112–114) 251. Shorter’s article was originally published in the *African Ecclesial Review* 14 (1972) 11–17.

⁵⁶ “Sacramentals are instituted for the sanctification of certain ministries of the Church, certain states of life, a great variety of circumstances in Christian life, and the use of many things useful to man. In accordance with bishop’s pastoral decisions, they can also respond to the needs, culture and special history of the Christian people of a particular region or time,” no. 1668, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Chicago: Loyola University, 1994). See also Documents of the Second Vatican Council, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium* 60–63, 79; and Instruction on the Proper Implementation of the Constitution on the

allow God's presence in activities such as harvesting, or the rejection of evil spirits, or the sanctification of daily activities.

Through the use of sacramentals and within the celebration of the sacraments, Christians in Africa do not reject African traditions, however they correct their trajectory, illumined by Christ and his message. Thus, in the theology of Kabasele Lumbala "Christ and the history of salvation become the 'pole of harmonization' in a world that continues to be understood as dual and marked by diverse participations and mediations shared by ancestors, human beings, animals, vegetables, and seemingly inanimate objects."⁵⁷

For example, blessings as a means of sanctification have been widely used in connection with cultural understandings of kinship and kingship relations within groups and clans. In particular the blessing of fields has traditionally been associated with the separation of fields from any possibility of infertility and any social division that could lead to death.⁵⁸ In developing a Christian ritual for the blessings of fields in parts of Africa it is assumed that a traditional socially centered activity can be given a further theological understanding. Such understanding arises out of the fact that through a blessing on the fields, a communal invocation of God's grace is requested on those associated with a particular field. Within such invocation, the ultimate purpose of the blessing is for those who take part in that liturgical celebration to remain open to the grace of God and to come to the realization of their human destiny, i.e. life with God.

In one of those blessings, Christians bring to the church soil from their fields and some of the seeds to be used for planting. The priest welcomes those Christians at the entrance to the church, liturgically vested and carrying holy water. He asks those coming for the blessing to deposit the soil in one pot and the seeds in another pot. The priest blesses the soil by asking that it may be free from accidents, dangers, thorns, or injuries through the use of tools. He blesses the seeds asking that they may produce a hundred-fold before sprinkling both, soil and seeds, with holy water. The priest requests plenty of rain and sunshine and the proper conditions for a good crop that will sustain God's people. After such blessings the pots are moved in procession to the foot of the altar where they are deposited. Psalm 50 is sung and the sign of peace is exchanged. Thereafter the celebration of the Eucharist continues as usual.

The Christian and indigenous African traditions are united in this example, as for Africans to bring some soil from the fields is to bring an entire field to the church, to bring some seeds is to have brought all the available

Sacred Liturgy, *Inter oecumenici* 6, 34; and, Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, *Musicam sacram* 45.

⁵⁷ F. Kabasele Lumbala, *Celebrating* 96. ⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 102–3.

planting seeds for the church to bless. However, within the Christian liturgy it is proclaimed and it is accepted that God is the one who makes things grow and he is the one who produces a plentiful harvest. The readings for such occasion proclaim such truths, e.g. Genesis 1:27–31, Psalm 125, John 12:23–26.

In another region such as Kasai (Democratic Republic of Congo), the month of February marks the start of the season in which people collect caterpillars from the wooded savanna. As deaths can occur as caterpillar collectors are bitten by snakes or other poisonous insects, a blessing for those going out is suggested by Kabasele Lumbala. In this case, not only is there a need to mark the different seasons through liturgical moments, but also the physical change from caterpillar to butterfly can be used to symbolize changes and conversion in the life of a Christian. Thus, an entrance song during the Eucharist and blessing can be chosen with a theme of conversion. Readings that speak of the fruits of Easter and the conversion of Jesus' disciples (e.g. Acts 2:37–47) or the signs of the times (e.g. Luke 21:29–33) follow. A homily after the Gospel follows trying to focus participants on the change from caterpillars into butterflies and the theme of Christian conversion. The prayers of the faithful focus attention on those who will be gathering caterpillars for community consumption, their generosity and their safety followed by a blessing on them and on a branch with caterpillars. It is through the caterpillars that the glory of God in his creation shines and makes human beings praise God through the offerings and the liturgy of the Eucharist that follows.

THEOLOGICAL CONTINUITIES AND CULTURAL FRAGMENTATIONS

As particular blessings are used for particular seasons and times of the year, the cultural allegory of an inculturated theology develops cultural elements in Africa in the same way that the people of Israel did throughout their own history. The Israelites assumed cultural elements from the lands they passed on their way to the promised land or from the lands that they lived in during periods of their history, i.e. the Babylonian exile.

Through his *via media* and his theological analysis Kabasele Lumbala's theology has become central to the ongoing development of a contemporary theology of inculturation in Africa. His own brand of African theology is centered on the liturgical rites of a particular Christian tradition and on the person of Christ, i.e. Scripture and tradition as centers of community have provided continuity within the Roman Catholic tradition. In terms of theological achievements, Kabasele Lumbala has managed to center theological reflection from within Africa in the creative power of liturgical rites. He has focused his theological reflection particularly on those rites that have managed to incorporate contemporary cultural elements not as

memories or texts from the past, but as challenging elements with God giving grace and salvific effect within a larger and universal Christian tradition.

CONCLUSION

The theology of inculturation and those involved in it, including Kabasele Lumbala, have continued to fulfil an important obligation as African theologians, as outlined by Bishop T. Tshibangu in the 1977 meeting of African theologians. He addressed them saying: "They [African theologians] cannot live as beings apart because they must bear responsibility for their own personal destiny and that of others. They must be involved in their community and their social participation must be as active as possible."⁵⁹ Those conditions are certainly the basis for Kabasele Lumbala's theology of liturgical inculturation. Further, it is through their search for Christ as the center of African Christianity that a process of ordering has started. Such effort can be compared to the systematic reflection by Jon Sobrino and Leonardo Boff in Latin American theology, whereby issues of methodology and criticism toward its methodology were settled by the publication of theological writings on the person of Christ. If Latin American Christologies aimed at a social context of liberation, African Christologies cannot be deemed less elaborate than in Latin America, but they can be described as inculturated Christologies that seem more elaborate and stronger than in Latin America.

It is Christ's centrality that can connect all bodies of contextual theology within the contemporary world, and therefore any attempt to contextualize the person of Christ in Africa opens fresh ways of Christological reflections at a wider level. So far, African Christian theology has developed a clear theological methodology through which Christian beliefs and doctrines have been thought afresh within the social and religious context of Africa. Within such systematic theological explorations, the spiritual African worlds of the ancestors has been used in order to explore the place of Christ, his life and Resurrection within a wider African context.

The centrality of Christ as the primordial ancestor relates to an African spiritual world that finally meets and celebrates together in the liturgy and honors once and again the memory of Christ and the ancestors through the Eucharist. The challenges of such theological reflection and sacramental action provide a further theological ordering still to be developed, always in a process of change as it is the case of all contextual African theology.

⁵⁹ Bishop T. Tshibangu (Zaire), "The Task of African Theologians," in *African Theology en Route* 75.