

My Ancestors' God: Reexamining the Doctrine of God Through the Lens of the Luo People's Ontology

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There are shared themes that contribute to the concept of African theology. John Mbiti defines African theology as “theological reflection and expression by African Christians.”¹ H. Sawyerr views African theology as an attempt to “interpret Christ to the African in such a way that he feels at home in his faith.”² J. S. Ukpong describes African theology as “Christian faith attaining African cultural expressions.”³ Since there is broad commonality among these African theologians, in this article I will use the term “African theology” in the singular with the acknowledgement of other divergent strands, for example, African inculturation theology, African liberation theology, Black theology, and African women's theology.⁴

Samuel Waje Kunhiyop observes that the word “African” in this theological praxis signals to some the rejection of Western thought and is perceived as hostile to Western theologies. Those who consider themselves defenders of evangelical and biblical Christianity suspect that African theology is syncretistic and unorthodox.⁵ I plead that such critics examine their inherent anthropological and theological biases that discredit the lived realities of others. African profiles about God's dealing with God's people cannot be interrogated using Western, evangelical rational principles. All spiritual lived experiences are meaningful no matter the strangeness and/or unintelligibility to others.

The God of my ancestors

I come from the Luo tribe of Kenya. Naturally, my African identity colors my Christian theology because I do not theologize in

1. J. S. Mbiti, “The Biblical Basis in Present Trends in African theology,” *African Theological Journal* 7.1 (1978): 72-85.

2. H. Sawyerr, “What Is African theology?” in: J. Parratt, ed., *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1987), 29-36.

3. J. S. Ukpong, *African Theologies Now: A Profile* (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1984), 30.

4. E. Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 69.

5. Samuel W. Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 1.

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a vacuum. Unfortunately, the development of Christian theology in Africa has been controlled by the West, despite Africans living out their faith within specific historical paradigms that are not Western.⁶ Wilbur O'Donovan notes that “theology must be truly Christian but also truly African in expression.”⁷ Edward Farley affirms that theology is a reflective activity undertaken within specific contexts.⁸ Emmanuel Y. Lartey posits that a fundamental and significant drive for any theological exercise is interpretation within circumstantial experiences.⁹

6. Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 3-4.

7. Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 5.

8. Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

9. Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006), 15.

Mbiti summarizes and outlines the six pillars of African Christian theology: the Bible; the theology of the established churches and traditions of Christendom; African Traditional Religions(s); African philosophy, religious heritage, and culture; African history; and the living experience of the church in Africa.¹⁰ African theology grows out of a critical dialogue between Christianity and the theologies of African Traditional Religion(s),¹¹ as it expresses the living gospel within the language, idioms, customs, and traditions of the African culture(s).¹² African theology thereby distinguishes between abstract theological knowledge and the experiences of African believers.

My ancestors' God

One thing that made me drop out of history class was that the history teacher spoke at length about the excursions of the great explorer, John Hanning Speke. The teacher related that this man traveled widely and discovered a lake in my village, which he named Lake Victoria in honor of Queen Victoria. I questioned the teacher's assertion that Speke had discovered *Nam Lolwe* (the local name for this lake)! How was this his discovery? My teacher reiterated categorically that history books said so. And so that was it!

I disagreed with the absurd history my teacher presented to the class. Furthermore, I agree with Mbiti that pioneer missionaries to Africa did not bring God to my village. God brought them to my village. God already existed among us and all along has had a presence in my village. They could not bring God because God was already there.

P. Boaheng notes how "the knowledge of God is innate and intuitive in Africa."¹³ There is no question about God's existence in my village, unlike in the West where there are numerous arguments put forth to prove God's existence. Samuel W. Kunhiyop laments that such arguments are pointless and meaningless to Africans, whose foundational beliefs acknowledge God's existence.¹⁴ I can imagine Kunhiyop's frustration when he wonders about burdening Africans with theologies of proof for God's existence. He is bothered that even though Africans can effectively engage in abstract thinking, theological reflection devoid of meaningful contextual grounding is valueless to most African Christians.¹⁵

Many educated individuals in the West find theological literature complex to comprehend. How can lay Africans identify with such theological reflections? I once informed a relative in Africa that I was studying Divinity in America. After an extended silence, he asked: "Do you mean American divinities?" His question is a

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sad indictment of the chasm between Western theological praxis and the lived realities of African Christians.

My people saw, marveled at, and reflected on God's creation in what Mbiti refers to as the "accumulation of ideas about the Universe" as they went through life.¹⁶ Without a formal understanding of the universe, they appreciated its many obscurities and believed that God was among them.

They understand God as the creator and maintainer of all things. God is timeless and transcendent yet immanent.¹⁷ God is associated with all things but not in a pantheistic sense, as Edward Tylor insisted. Tylor held that Africans believe in many gods and, in fact, are animists who believe that all things, even inanimate objects, have souls.¹⁸ Such a way of thinking about the beliefs of my people indicates how different the Western Christian view of God is from the ways my ancestors have conceptualized God. This stereotypical view derives from a colonial ideological mentality. Indeed, African theology must propagate a decolonized gospel to challenge such myopic stereotypes.

My people believe in one God, whom they refer to as *Nya-saye* (the beseeched one) *Obongonyakalaga* (one of a kind, the all-powerful everlasting one). My ancestors worshipped him in *hembko* or *hembho* (sacred places) and associated the supernatural with sacred shrines, trees, huge rocks, hills, and *Nam Lolwe* (the so-called Lake Victoria).

While there are different accounts of the creation of the universe, my tribe also has one. My late grandmother, Ogony Apuki, once recited to me the Luo Creation myth, which holds that in

10. Y. S Han and J. Beyers, "A Critical Evaluation of the Understanding of God in J. S. Mbiti's theology," *Acta Theologica* 37, no. 2 (2017): 5-29.

11. Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology: Adaptation or Incarnation?* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1977), 1.

12. Brian Howell and Jenell Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 270.

13. P. Boaheng, "God and the Traditional African Experience: Shattering the Stereotypes," *Thinking About Religion* 10 (2012): 8.

14. Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 4.

15. Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 4.

16. John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), 31.

17. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1969), 37.

18. Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), 1-39.

the beginning God created Oloo, who begot a son, Magoyi, who begot three sons: Shem (the white people), Rabudi (the black people) and Japheth (the brown people). These three sons also begot their own sons and grandchildren, who through marriages and intermarriages begot the other people groups of the world. This myth alludes, as Mbiti notes, that *Nyasaye Obongonyakalaga* (God) is the guardian, the caretaker, and the sustainer, for whom human beings are central in the creation. God governs creation through established laws of nature. God is the one who gave regulations, traditions, and gifts of life. God is the Defender, Custodian, and Savior.¹⁹

In the Luo creation myth, God is the provider. God's providence provides for the creation as God showers the whole universe with goodness—life, sunshine, food, rain, water, good health, and the fertility of people, animals, and plants. God is the Healer and Helper in times of trouble. My people worship God as the provider, rescuer, and ruler, who judges and distributes all things justly, saves the subjugated, and penalizes the wrongdoer.²⁰

God is also the Mediator of the world, who chastises wickedness using sickness, disease, accidents, famine, drought, storm, war, calamity, or even death. Yet God also listens to the cry of people and forgives them.²¹ God is expressed in images, such as Creator, Potter, Designer, Helper, Benefactor, Guardian, Ruler, Judge, Father, and Mother, among others.²² I wonder at all these biblical and conceptual images of God! Here, the mother imagery is less concerned with the Western focus on God's 'gender' but instead depicts the mother as the center of social organization in the home. It alludes to the close relationship between people and God. It implies that God has not only 'begotten' or made humans but is also their protector, provider, and keeper.²³

Contested interpretations

Han and Beyers argue that even though there may be similarities in the concepts and ideas between the religion of my ancestors and Christianity, these resemblances do not mean that the two religions have the same theological foundation, message, or meaning. They contend we must differentiate between concept and content.²⁴

How can the faith of my ancestors supply the content of special revelation deemed as worshipping the God of the Bible? My ancestors had the concept (natural/general revelation) and Christianity has the content (special revelation). Does not the apostle Paul postulate a radical theology of universal monotheism when inviting the Jews to faith in the One who cannot be domesticated in Israel? God is present everywhere, including my village!

Overall, Mbiti captures my people's concepts of God (like general biblical concepts) in his presentation, notwithstanding the

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inherent limitations of the lens of Western Christian theologies. He presumes a link between Christian and African perspectives on God and stresses their connectedness. Mbiti regards my ancestors' religion as monotheistic, a preparation for the gospel message, and asserts that the God of my ancestors is the Jewish-Christian God.²⁵ He also posits God's general revelation to my ancestors as one and the same special revelation granted Israel.²⁶

Kwame Bediako objects, however, that Mbiti erroneously unifies the African religious history with the Christian theological category of salvation history.²⁷ Furthermore, Han and Beyers are adamant that Mbiti fails to highlight the African God's incompatible negative attributes in contrast to the God of the Bible. For them, apart from African theology celebrating the idea of monotheism and viewing African Traditional Religion as a *praeparatio evangelica*, it neither indicates nor formulates the Christian Trinitarian concept of God.²⁸ One might then ask how Judaism articulates and formulates a Trinitarian concept of God? By this measure, how can the God of the Jews be the God of Christians? Charles Nyamiti also asserts that God in Christianity is essentially Christocentric, as Christ reveals a new relationship between God and humans, something missing in African Traditional Religions(s).²⁹ Again, one might ask how Judaism embraces the Christocentric essence of Christianity?

Han and Beyers further question the process by which African theology discerns and rearticulates the Christian message in an African cultural context. This involves the disproportionate use of African concepts and tenets as communication tools to meet the

25. John S. Mbiti, "The Role of the Jewish Bible in African Independent Churches," *International Review of Mission* 93(369), (2004):219-237. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2004.tb00455.x> Accessed 15 March 2023.

26. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 59-68.

27. Kwame Bediako, "John Mbiti's Contribution to African Theology," in J.K. Olupona and S.S. Nyang, eds., *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honor of John S. Mbiti* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 367-390.

28. Cf. Han and Beyers, "A Critical Evaluation of the Understanding of God in J. S. Mbiti's Theology," 5-29.

29. Charles Nyamiti, *African Tradition, and the Christian God* (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1977), 7-8.

19. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 35-44.

20. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 46.

21. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 46.

22. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 45-46.

23. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 46.

24. Han and Beyers, "A Critical Evaluation of the Understanding of God in J. S. Mbiti's Theology," 5-29.

aspirations of their audience without considering an engagement with the rest of Christians worldwide. The implication is that African theology is weak in its Christian identity.³⁰

I beg to differ. I have had opportunity to attend some top-notch Western theological institutions. I can state with confidence that Western theological ideologies dominate Christian theology and have yet to embrace contemporary African Christian thinking. I have attended classes that resisted my theological notions because of their apparent strangeness and unintelligibility. I have had to regurgitate the explanations and answers that make the grade, as though Western theology holds universal knowledge regarding thoughts about God. The word of God may be settled in heaven forever (Psalms 119: 89, NASB), but theology shifts according to emergent realities.

Apologists for African theology, like Joseph Drexler-Dreis, contend that Western theological understandings require decolonization. He charges that the Westernized theology of revelation is often inundated “epistemologically in colonial relations of power.”³¹ Despite the merits and the demerits of Dreis’ arguments, African theology is not weak because it fails to engage with wider Christendom. Rather, it is choked by enormous resistance from Western theological positions!

Syncretism in some expressions of African Christianity is not a matter of lack of Christian commitment, but instead an indication that Christianity wrapped in Western ideologies has not responded to the religious aspirations of Africans.³² Contextual theology will always seek to scratch where it itches.

Conclusion

Mbiti correctly posits the God of my ancestors as the same universal God who revealed himself to Israel. To claim that my ancestors worship a different God than the God of the Bible—since the religion of my ancestors (natural/general revelation) does not articulate the doctrine of the Trinity (special revelation)—is an absurdity. Judaism does not accept Jesus as the son of God, yet the God of the Jews is the God of Christians.

Mbiti’s assertion that God’s *general* revelation to my ancestors is the same as the special revelation granted to Israel is erroneous, as he presumes the sameness of all revelation and thus combines all history with salvation history. Nonetheless, the God of general revelation is the God of special revelation. The universal self-revealing God of my ancestors is the God of the Bible. God has been revealed everywhere—through the word, in the world, and in human existence.

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What God revealed to my ancestors, however, was less than God’s complete revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. Even though this revelation is not confined exclusively to the biblical record, God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is much broader. In Jesus of Nazareth, God is revealed as the word made flesh. This revelation of God in Jesus Christ is absent in the religion of my ancestors. But God is not.

Christianity and the religion of my ancestors share some concepts and notions regarding general revelation. African theology can use these shared perspectives to articulate the gospel contextually. As this article argues, however, the treatment of African theology demonstrates a lack of coherence in the theological landscape of Western Christianity. The existence of feminist, liberation, and black theologies with their focus on gospel contextualization in Africa is an attempt in this direction.

30. Han and Beyers, “A Critical Evaluation of the Understanding of God in J.S. Mbiti’s Theology,” 5-29.

31. Joseph Drexler-Dreis, “Theological Thinking and Eurocentric Epistemologies: A Challenge to Theologians from within Africana Religious Studies,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 6.1 (2018): 27-49.

32. Sylvester Ngonga, *Labyrinths of Corrections: A Prison Therapist’s Memoirs* (California: Create Space, 2017), 87-88.