

MAIN FEATURES OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

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Introduction¹

As background to this paper I want to paint a brief portrait of contemporary Christianity in Africa. By the beginning of the twenty-first century the religious landscape in Africa had changed radically from what it had been hitherto. Geographically, the southern two-thirds of Africa can be defined as 'Christian Africa'. The northern third remains predominantly Muslim. Demographically, about half of Africa's population is Christian, and the number of Christians is steadily growing through conversion at a higher rate than the demographic increase. The question of Christian survival or demise raised in the second half of the twentieth century has now become outmoded. Instead, it is as if the Christian faith has fallen in love with Africa and Africa has fallen in love with the Christian faith. At least for some generations to come, the two have now been destined to walk side by side, hand in hand, and step by step.

All this poses many questions, such as: What is Christianity doing in and with Africa? What is Africa doing with the Christian faith, which has no monopoly over any generation, land, system, island, or continent? What kind of Christianity is defining and shaping Christian Africa?

1. Africa has continued to contribute its share of martyrs. From the very early Church to this day, the blood of the martyrs has never ceased to flow on African soil. For example, the government of Sudan imprisoned a pregnant woman, Meriam Ibrahim, for being a Christian, and "sentenced her to death

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¹ Professor Mbiti delivered this essay as a keynote speech at the *Missio Africanus* conference on June 26, 2015, at Church Mission Society in Oxford.

for refusing to renounce Christianity”.² She gave birth in prison where, with her first child, she had been confined. Only after world pressure did the Sudanese government lift the death sentence and allow her, with her husband and their two children, to leave the country. They fled to the United States.

The *BBC World News* reported respectively on 2 December 2014 and 8 April 2015 that militants of Al Shabaab from Somalia had crossed into Kenya and killed many Christians. Thus: On 2 December 2014 they killed at least 36 quarry workers in Northern Kenya, after separating the Muslims and then killing the Christians. On 2 April 2015, Al Shabaab militants killed 148 students (and 2 employees) at Garissa University in Kenya. They separated the Muslims from the Christians, and then killed the Christians, some of whom had gathered for prayer in the early morning (during Holy Week).

2. African Christianity is very busy constructing thousands upon thousands of churches and places of worship, of every size and shape, where countless people congregate to worship on Saturday nights, Sundays, and other days. Worship also takes place in the open or under trees, in market places, and on public grounds in cities and towns. The dynamic worship includes: shouting to the Lord; dancing to the Lord; speaking in tongues; healing the sick; driving out unwanted spirits; preaching; conversions; Bible readings and sermons; cleansing the defiled; soliciting success (in business, family life, examinations, politics, good rains and crops); and requesting protection against unwelcome forces. These unwelcome forces include: bad dreams; bad luck; curses; family disintegration; dwindling love; the evil eye; misfortune; possession by unwanted spirits; sickness; sinful intentions; unclean thoughts and words; unresponsive love; witchcraft; etc. Worship sessions involve taking collections (of money and goods); laying on of hands to bless; baptizing; burying the dead; commemorating the departed; celebrating happy events (like birthdays, marriages, passing examinations, reunions, success in elections, ordinations, Holy Communion (Eucharist), cure of barrenness and sickness, reconciliation, finding lost and stolen items, return of a family member); and even pronouncing curses.

3. It is a very creative Christianity involving men, women, and youth. It is being heard (sometimes very loudly), felt, seen, and propagated (expanded) through innumerable channels, various activities, and persons. These include: art; Bible translations; bill boards; books; recordings; catechists; choirs; Christian education; Christian colleges and universities; the founding of independent churches, of which there are at least fifteen thousand; church media; and a host of church personnel (both ordained and lay, employed and voluntary, expatriate and indigenous); computers and the Internet; drama; health centres; indigenous songs and hymns; inherited or their own

2 As reported in *foxnews.com* of 14 September 2014.

created liturgies; market preachers; memorisation of Bible verses; music; mass media; publications; research; sculptures; etc.

4. African Christianity is linked to global Christianity through ecumenical ties, historical ties, institutional ties, financial ties, personnel, educational ties, theological ties, ecclesiastical ties, publications, and being in constant touch through modern mass media and the Internet. It is sending ecumenical co-workers (missionaries) from African countries to other African countries and to overseas countries and churches. African Christians are establishing churches and congregations in foreign countries in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, India, Japan, Korea, Australia, and presumably China (already or soon).

5. The Bible is the foundation of African Christianity.

Bible translation into African languages accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century. By the beginning of this year, 2015, there were nearly 800 translations of the full Bible, the New Testament or portions (of one or more books) out of Africa's 2,000 languages and about 3,000 dialects. African people are hearing the Word of God spoken in their own languages, like at the first Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13). These translations are powerful and crucial tools for the work of evangelisation, mission, building the church (Body of Christ), and the evolution of African theology, especially in indigenous languages. African theologians have been writing in European languages, and Bible translations are carried out largely from European languages.

Indeed, oral African theology in African languages is thriving, beginning from the moment the gospel is proclaimed in a given language area. It is articulated informally in conversations, singing with or without instruments, including improvised ones such as calabashes, whistles, clapping, drums, tins, and rattles with metal and plastic pieces, etc. Africa openly shows its happiness in being Christian, in formal and informal ways, in written and mainly unwritten ways. African Christianity dances, sings, shouts, prays, heals, expels unwanted spirits, witnesses, and variously praises the Lord through oral, symbolic, and practical theology. The Bible gives guidance, inspiration, and support to this vibrant Christianity, and in the nurture of the Christian faith on the African mind, heart, and spirit.

In connection with the Bible in Africa, let me add a big 'footnote' on two growing concerns. One concern addresses the fact that it is largely (if not exclusively) from European languages, English, French, German, Italian, etc. that translations into African languages are made. There is now an increasing call for translations to be done directly from the biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into African languages.

The second concern is that, starting from the nineteenth century, it has been the missionaries, 'foreign speakers' of African languages, who have made the translations. In every case, Africans have helped these missionary

translators. In rare cases, Africans alone have recently begun to do some translations, but under the 'supervision' and 'guidelines' of missionaries and scholars in Europe and America. The growing wish now is that competent African scholars will make translations directly from the biblical languages into their own languages.

Nevertheless, scholars and churches express deep appreciation and gratitude for the translations that both foreign and indigenous translators have accomplished. This appreciation also goes to the various World Bible Societies that finance, publish, and distribute the Bibles in African and other languages. Without making the Bible available in that way, there would be no modern African Christianity. African scholars are designating these as the first or the colonial phase of African Bible translations, which started in the colonial era and were made mainly from colonial languages.

Today scholars, together with more and more other readers of the vernacular Bibles, are calling for a new phase where capable African scholars translate the Bible directly from its original languages into their own respective languages. This second phase can be called indigenous Bible translation. However, translations from both phases should not be seen or set up as being in conflict with each other. On the contrary, both would serve African Christianity side by side, and enhance people's understanding of the Scriptures.

In this connection, I mention that I have ventured to translate the Greek New Testament into Kiikamba, my mother tongue in Kenya, spoken by about five million people in eastern Africa, of whom over 85% are Christians of various church traditions. The Kenya Literature Bureau published it in 2014, and is also distributing it free of charge to primary schools in Ukambani where Kiikamba is spoken. The cost of printing and distributing the first 3,000 copies is a gift from Christians and churches in Switzerland and a few in the United States of America. The people, churches and primary schools in Ukambani are very grateful for this sponsorship. However, we still need much more funding so that the publisher can print sufficient copies to supply about 30 copies to each of the 3,000 primary schools and some local churches. Finding the necessary money is extremely difficult. The book will not be sold.

I am told that I became the first African to translate the Bible single-handedly from the original languages into an African language, and that this achievement is a landmark in the history of the Church and Christianity in Africa. The translation has raised a lot of excitement in Kenya and beyond, and has been greeted with a lot of enthusiasm. I put into the translation all my skills - academic, mental, physical, and spiritual. I spent eight months on the first draft, working between two and fifteen hours a day, over a period of two years, while attending to other obligations, travel, and the family in Kenya and Switzerland. It was very hard work to do the translation but I enjoyed it, and it enriched my academic and spiritual life. Translating the New Testament, the book about Jesus Christ, brought me very close to him, so that I found him afresh, as my Friend and Saviour.

Knowing that African Christians are very keen to read and hear the Bible read, I paid particular attention to several features in the work. These included, for example: making a revised orthography whereby I departed from much of the old and foreign orthography. It was the missionaries who introduced reading and writing in Ukambani in the last century, among other good services. So they also had determined the orthography for writing Kiiikamba, which naturally accorded with their foreign understanding and included speaking it with a foreign accent. My revised orthography eliminates the foreign accent, and sticks closely to the way we Akamba speak our language without accent.

The Akamba population is over 85% Christian, and many older people cannot read. Because most people only get to know the Bible when it is read in churches, at schools, at market places, and in Christian homes if any are available, I paid close attention to the oral readability. I made the sentences generally short, and I integrated into the text the literary flow of the language and its natural rhythm. Translation involves bringing two or more cultures into play. I addressed the biblical culture to make it understandable in and by the Akamba (African) cultural and religious world. I gave particular attention to gender considerations, making the Scriptures address all genders where relevant. I eliminated anti-Semitism. I reintroduced the use of the original Kiiikamba word *Mulungu* for God, since for millennia the Akamba, like other African peoples, have known and related to God, for whom there is a word in every African language. This is the same God as described in the Bible.

I paid close attention to the original Greek text, word for word, verse for verse, chapter for chapter and book for book. I also made full use of the critical apparatus, which handles the Greek and other variants from the early and extant texts of the New Testament. I consulted some twenty New Testament versions in nine African and European languages. For some biblical concepts and words there are no direct equivalents in Kiiikamba. In such cases, I had to create Kiiikamba words, or make roundabout diversions to reach meaningful renderings. Kiiikamba is rich in creating words from their roots, which makes them understandable in the context in which they are used. In some cases, I incorporated Greek and Hebrew terms that have already been *kiiikambacised* in the course of the past century, as Christianity has deepened its roots in the country.

In course of the translation and revisions, I regularly consulted Akamba people, from the youngest school children to the oldest persons in their communities. This was to check on the vocabulary, readability, flow of the translation, and its clarity. I gave and read texts among the people in order to get their reactions, and make adjustments to the translation. Each time, the people were very interested in and excited about this exercise. Altogether, I made up to eight revisions, until I felt completely satisfied with this translation of the Word of God. Those who have now seen it in print are keen to read the book. When I was in Kenya in April 2015, a young man who had

gotten a copy of this Kiikamba Bible (NT), came up to me and put questions to me, and told me with much joy that he had immediately started to read the whole Bible (NT).

6. African Christianity is active in practical ways

One of the ways in which African Christianity is active is in Christian hospitals and medical centres that are often reputed to offer better medical care for the sick and (expectant) mothers and babies, than many other hospitals. It is also working for inter-ethnic reconciliation in conflict areas, and in inter-religious dialogue especially with Islam. African Christianity is sending church workers to other ethnic groups and other countries of Africa, Europe, America and Asia. There are many thriving African-founded churches and congregations in America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. It also receives and welcomes expatriate workers from the overseas countries of America, Asia, Europe and Oceania. Some of these serve in the local churches as pastors, priests, doctors, nurses, social workers, teachers, technicians, organisers and specialists in development projects and in educational institutions, in the media, in communications, and in publication.

7. Faced or Characterised by Positive, Negative, and Neutral Paradoxes and Dilemmas

On the African scene, this dynamic Christianity exists within the paradoxes and dilemmas of African life. Many of these seem to belong to the very nature of African life (physical, cultural, worldviews, and traditions); others are self-inflicted, and some have their roots from within and without. Christianity is not screened from these realities of African life. On the contrary, it is enveloped in them, it is entwined within them, and it is part of them. By its very nature, Christianity is a collection of human entities which contain these paradoxes and dilemmas. It is both actor and spectator, giving and receiving, and being engaged and challenged.

On the *'negative side'* one can name: conflicts (economic, historical, ideological, political, and religious); endemic corruption; ethnicism; exploitation; fraud; greed for money and power; health (severe) concerns; disregard of human rights; material inequalities; injury to nature and environment; injustices; oppression (social, cultural, political, and religious); poverty; money scams; and being victims of the mass media. These *'negative'* happenings are carried out by elements in the total population, which includes those who constitute African Christianity.

On the *'positive side'* African Christianity has many opportunities and facilities that foster and support it. These include: art; Bible translations; bill boards; recordings; catechists; choirs; Christian education; church institutions; church organisations; church personnel; clergy; communication facilities; computers and the Internet; dance and drama activities; DVDs; evangelistic campaigns; evangelists; films; financial support; health centres;

hymns and indigenous songs; vast and increasing human knowledge and skills; interaction with one another in the global village; lay preachers; leaflets; liturgies; magazines; market preachers; mass media; ministers; missionaries; music; newspapers; oral theology; pastors; periodicals; photographs; planes and flying services; poetry (written and sung); prayers by the laity and clergy; priests; publications; radio; research; science and technology; Scriptures; sculptures; SMSs; songs; story telling; street preachers; teachers; telephone; television; thousands of students; tracts; travel; videos; voluntary workers; youth; etc.

These negative and positive features capture the new African Christianity almost at its infancy. Nevertheless, they point to a healthy growth as part of global Christianity, confessing one Lord, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to the glory of God the Almighty and Creator of all things, visible and invisible. We thank the Lord for making us witness the unfolding of this rainbow Christianity of the twenty-first century on the African scene – a blessed and exciting privilege.

8. A Pilgrim Christianity

An African proverb states that: “Cattle are born with ears; their horns grow later.” This promising and exuberant African Christianity exists in a state of pilgrimage; it is born with ears but is in the process of growing its horns. That accords with what both our Lord Jesus Christ and his servant the Apostle Paul told us. At his Ascension, our Lord divulged to us that: “It is not for you to know the times (*chronos*) or the seasons (*kairos*) which the Father has placed under his own authority (*exousia*). But you will receive power (*dunamis*) when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses (*martures*) in Jerusalem, together with all Judea and Samaria, and up to the extreme end (*eschatos*) of the age (*aioonos*) (Acts 1:7, 8).” These are powerful words, and two thousand years later their power has not been exhausted.

St. Paul put this divine pilgrimage within his vision: “But we all, who have an unveiled face, gazing like in a mirror at the glory (*doxas*) of the Lord, are in the process of being changed into the same image (*eikona*), from glory (*doxas*) to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” (2 Cor. 3:18).

African Christianity is a truly pilgrim Christianity. It will go no further than its eschatological completion (perfection) set in the Lord himself, as the Scriptures say: “When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to him, so that God may be all in all (*panta en pasin*)” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Factors contributing to the rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa

The Christian faith in Africa has continued to expand rapidly due to a number of factors. We can only mention some briefly.

1. The *missionary factor* is fundamental, since in modern times it was initially the missionaries from Europe and America who brought the gospel anew to Africa. Many were very devoted to this task, and some died in Africa spreading the gospel and rendering practical services like medical care, education, and producing written materials.

2. The *fading of colonial rule* gave Africans the freedom to reject the Christian faith or take it up seriously on our own terms. The majority chose to keep it, to embrace it afresh, and to expand it. This was in spite of the fact that (Western) Christianity which had largely mediated the faith since the nineteenth century was largely foreign on African soil (culture, worldview, life style, and multiplicity of languages).

3. A profound (and quiet) factor facilitating the planting and expansion of the Christian faith is the *traditional African Religion and Religiosity*. Almost by nature, Africans are deeply religious. However, hitherto early missionaries and their converts wrongly regarded African religion and treated it as 'demonic', 'heathen', and antagonistic to the Christian faith. But beneath the surface of this expression of ignorance and falsification, the two religious systems were quietly interacting positively. This was particularly accelerated by the fact that African religion revolves around the monotheistic belief in one God, the Almighty, and Creator of all things. From time immemorial African religion has been integrated into the whole of life. It had no founders. Its practical expressions and ideas evolved in different ways and places, such as the names of the one God (which we find in every language and people or 'tribe'), praying to God, and making offerings and sacrifices to God variously from place to place and time to time. People also acknowledge other spiritual realities, created by God and subject to him. Some are personifications of natural phenomena and objects, and others are said to be remnants of human (and animal) beings after death. Personifications help people to relate to the puzzles, mysteries, and questions of nature. It is this traditional knowledge of and belief in God which has greatly facilitated the spread of the Christian faith in Africa. The Akamba and other African peoples have spontaneously taken the message of Jesus as coming from the same God in whom they have trusted since time immemorial.

African religion acknowledges **the same God** who is depicted (similarly and differently) in the Bible. The attributes of God in the Bible have many parallels in African concepts of God. Adherents of African religion do not find stumbling blocks to continuing their belief in God as presented in the Scriptures. They take *the Word of God in the Bible as the Word of the same God* they know through African religion. This is a complex phenomenon, taking place at profoundly spiritual, religious, mental, emotional, personal, and community levels. It is both personal and public. Traditional African belief in God is a communal and integral identity that no individual can counteract

or contradict. It is part of the total religious baggage, with which African Christianity has entered the twenty-first century.

4. A fourth factor is the work of African Christians, who both informally (mainly) and formally spread news about the Christian faith. This happens more or less the way people share regular and ordinary news. Formal contributors are male and female, trained and untrained, literate and illiterate: catechists, evangelists, pastors, priests, and church workers. They use tools and methods, including the Bible, teaching materials, radio, symbols, television, films, recordings, and engage in conversations, discussions and rallies, etc. Personal witness is very effective, whereby individuals or groups tell of their conversion and the joy of being Christian. This often leads to further conversions and the expansion of Christian knowledge and practice. Informal spreading of the gospel takes place all the time, in family circles and communities. This is the *New* and *Good News*, and because it was previously unknown, people normally pay attention to it sooner or later. They embrace the gospel, consciously or unconsciously, feeling that it enhances their religiosity.

The work of Africans in spreading Christianity goes beyond the continent of Africa to other continents. African Christians (as students, immigrants, refugees, workers, with or without families, from home or locally established where they live) in America, Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Australia, and Asian Countries, form their congregations that are organised and whose services may parallel or be quite different from those of the local Western type of congregations. Here, they promote parishes and congregations that cater primarily to immigrants from outside the Western regions and cultural traditions. They integrate African cultural and social traditions in the new (foreign) environment. Some relate to various local denominations (Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, Reformed, Protestant, Catholic, etc.), or relate to Independent churches in Africa, or become Independent churches of their own. In Britain they founded the Birmingham Christian College in 2014, sponsored by the African Pentecostal churches. They are carrying out lively missionary work in Europe, for example. They are open to members from other intercultural, interethnic, interdenominational backgrounds and even other religions.³

5. A fifth factor is the translation and distribution of the Bible into African languages.

By the end of 2014 the full Bible, New Testament, or portions were available in close to 800 African languages. The Bible has had a tremendous impact

³ See, among other writings, Harvey Kwiyanis's splendid description of African Christianity in the West, *Sent Forth*, with a comprehensive bibliography. Harvey C. Kwiyanis, *Sent Forth: African Missionary Work in the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).

upon the spreading and shaping of the Christian faith and in building the Church in Africa. Through the Bible the people hear the gospel ‘in our own languages’. That makes it ‘our Bible’. People read and hear the Bible as describing comprehensively African life – religious, cultural, social, political, economic, family life, spiritual realities, religious aspirations, worldviews, historical journeys, etc. The Bible places the Christian message right into the totality of African reality, making it really ‘our Bible’ and ‘our message’.

6. *The Central and Decisive Factor is the name and fact of Jesus Christ.* The portrait of Jesus and his life and ministry among the people of his time rings loud bells in African life. This is seen in his healing the sick, chasing out unwanted spirits, feeding the hungry, receiving people both within and on the edge of society (foreign rulers, women, children, the lepers, the blind), and preaching peace and love. Africans have fallen in love with Jesus Christ and are formulating hundreds of Christological titles to describe him and their relationship with him. It is their (our) answer to his question to the disciples: “Whom do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:27; Luke 9:20) The titles speak of people’s personal relationship with Jesus and their hope in him. These can be summarised in a poster I once saw in 2013, on the back of a bus in Kenya, which read: “Who God bless no man curse: It’s no secret I love Jesus.”⁴ We shall look more closely at this Jesus, whom African Christianity claims to **love** openly.

7. *Jesus has many faces in African Christianity*

Who then is Jesus Christ today, in whose name some Christians have suffered or died? Jesus Christ is a new, precious, mysterious, fascinating Name at the centre of African Christianity. Millions of Christians in Africa proclaim the Name of Jesus in one or more Christological titles. By and through these titles, they have a two-way access to him and they recognise him. Who then do African Christians say Jesus is? How are they answering the question that Jesus posed to his followers two thousand years ago: Who do you say that I am? In answer, they proclaim Jesus in hundreds of titles, as listed in my collection, plus others not included. Jesus Christ has many faces and many titles.

Jesus Christ, as the Living Focus of Belief and Trust

A crucial element has entered the African world through the Christian faith. And that is the person, life, and work of Jesus Christ. He is not named in African religion as such, but some of his activities and teachings are present in or can be read into the setting of African life and religiosity. Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels is very ‘visible’ on the African scene: intermingling

4 See Appendix.

with the people, walking in the countryside, healing the sick, exorcising the unclean and unwanted spirits, teaching in parables drawn from family and community life (sowing, harvesting, weeds, sheep, children, women, love, peace, and other values). All these descriptions about the life, person and work of Jesus find a ready application in African life, both traditional and modern. In this respect, Jesus is not an invisible Stranger: African people respond to him with endearment, respect, welcome, and love, as if they have been “walking with him” already. As with the two disciples walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection (Luke 24:13–16) has Jesus been walking with the African people but with their eyes being held (closed), without recognising him, until the gospel came to them? Christianity in Africa is built upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. If the Christian message had been to tell people only about God that would have been superfluous, since the traditional religion is grounded in belief in God, and they knew God before missionaries came. But Jesus is the magnet who now draws all people to himself.

African Christianity has put Jesus at both the centre and the peripherals of life. It has embraced classical and traditional Christology, giving African colour to the interpretation of Christological titles such as King, Priest, Lord, Saviour, and so on. But in addition it is also generating its own peculiar aspects of Christology, to the relevance and enrichment of African Christianity. As well as interpreting traditional Christological concepts afresh, Africans are generating concepts by which they endeavour to understand Jesus more clearly, by which they can embrace him more firmly and by which they can adore him more devoutly. So, we find a Christology that combines historical titles with local or contextual titles. And these titles are strongly coloured by African religion, for it is in the context of African religiosity that the name of Jesus Christ has been pronounced, and it is in same context that people respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁵

Africans embrace the Christian faith because of Jesus Christ who is the new element that has come into their religious experience. It is the message about Jesus Christ that has captured their attention. And it is precisely the person of Jesus Christ in that message who has won their allegiance and devotion and who has become the ultimate point of hope in their lives.

Most of what Africans say and think about Jesus Christ is not written down or publicly proclaimed. It is expressed orally. Some of it is found in Christian (and popular ‘secular’) songs and hymns. A lot is articulated in

5 We note in passing, that some historical and traditional concepts in Christology are difficult to translate into African languages and worldviews. That difficulty makes their meaning obscure. An example is part of the Nicene Creed expressing belief in one Lord Jesus Christ, as being “Begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father . . .”

sermons, catechumen teaching and free prayers, especially in families, and pastoral ministry. Some African theologians also research, write, and publish on Christology; and, in recent decades, this has become (one of) the most popular subjects of theological publications.

Without going into details, we take the list of Christological titles that people are using in African Christianity. We can say that they are in response to the question that Jesus put to His disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:27; Luke 9:20) Some titles are universal, but others are ‘typically African’. Many are still ‘raw’ in that they have not undergone a process of being theologically scrutinised and used widely. People use these Christological titles and answers as support in identifying and relating to Jesus Christ. They apply them in conversations and prayers, in sermons and counselling, in hymns and songs, in writing and mass media.

Many are metaphorical, symbolic, and figurative titles, reflecting the strong feature of the oral tradition in Africa. Some are suggested by biblical stories and passages. Others arise out of experiences of African daily lives. For the most part, lay people articulate them as they talk about the faith. These individuals are also the ones who produce oral theology. Thus, this can be described or considered as mass Christology; oral Christology; a Christology in the field; a Christology in songs and hymns; a Christology where people are, whether in church services, prayer meetings, Christian camps for young people, meetings of Mothers’ Unions, travelling in buses, or walking on foot. It is a Christology of the people by the people, who encounter Jesus or experience him in different circumstances of their lives. So they respond to him in ways that are personally meaningful to them. They ‘name’ Jesus, and through any or several of the Christological titles, they establish a personal relationship with him. The titles are personal (private) confessions of faith; they are like creeds spontaneously articulated without theological controversies. These titles attach Jesus to the people, and the people to Jesus. They are the oral emblems of endearment to Jesus. Jesus has many faces and titles in African Christianity, and the number of them is endless, as people continue to encounter him, relate to him, get new visions of him, and verbalise new titles. These are the fruit of quiet dialogue, or encounter, or meeting between the Christian faith and African religiosity.

About the Christological Titles of Jesus Christ in African Christianity⁶

1. The titles come from the Bible, early Church, historical Christological titles, missionary teaching, evangelism, experiences, and reflections of Christians in Africa. Thus, some are both local and global, some are ecumenical and contemporary. The Bible (in full and in part) is translated

6 See Appendix.

into nearly 800 African languages. So Africa is cultivating biblical Christianity in almost one thousand African languages – our own languages. Hence, this beautiful proliferation of Christological titles of Jesus is the naming of Jesus Christ in our own languages as related to our traditional and contemporary lives.

2. The titles place Jesus squarely and absolutely in the entire African setting: communication (media and transport), culture, education, health care, family, geography, history, languages, political institutions, social institutions, religions, and spirituality.
3. Most of the titles are concrete, tangible, and pictorial. As Africa had no alphabet (except in Egypt and Ethiopia), it had an oral culture with symbols, proverbs, metaphors, stories, etc. So it is largely through the oral tradition that the aspirations of African people capture and experience Jesus in their mind, heart, and spirit. Hardly any of the titles are abstract. They are formulated originally in African languages that people understand and use, but are listed in translation into English. They are found in sermons, songs, hymns, conversations, pastoral counselling, Christian education, the giving of advice, discussion of the Christian faith and in the Scriptures. Thus, most of the titles originate largely from informal oral theological output (even if some are eventually written down), and much less from written theology. They come from the laity and clergy. They are articulated by literate and illiterate Christian women, men, and youth, the old and the young, living in their (mainly rural) places of origin, or in towns, or as migrants in their countries or overseas.
4. These titles depict a spirit of endearment and loving attachment to Jesus. Through them, the people rightly claim him and put a seal on him, as belonging to everyone in Africa. The titles show Africans feeling at home with Jesus. Many have family and social attachments. The people imagine that he also is at home with them.
5. Traditionally, Africans give people names that have meanings, and at any age of the persons concerned: babies, children, young people, older people, according to character, position, or occupation, etc. The names often mark the character, the circumstances at birth, or later (family, geographical, historical, social, weather, etc.). With these many symbolic, metaphorical, and literal titles of Jesus, African Christians aspire to claim and maintain Jesus Christ as one of them, as being in the middle of their lives, activities, experiences, joys, fears, and hopes. In feeling that he belongs to them, they feel that they also belong to him. With these titles, everyone has a 'share' of Jesus, a 'claim' on Jesus, knows Jesus, names Jesus with a title and relates to Jesus as a known person. The specific titles, by which people name Jesus, make no room to doubt him, to deny him, or to betray him. They are not dealing with doctrines or disciplines of the church, or with theological dogmas and controversies, or a fictitious character. People are happy and confident to proclaim his

Name, to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ whom they know by various titles. The slogan or poster on the back of a public bus in Nairobi, which I saw in 2013, summarises the core of African Christianity. It was written in red and read: “It’s no secret I love Jesus”.

6. This Jesus has many faces, and the people **know** him and **love** him by one or more of his faces. Jesus is the core, and wonder, and admiration of African Christianity. Everyone has access to Jesus through any or several of these titles, for they exclude nobody. They are so comprehensive that they embrace everyone. With these titles, no person is or would feel excluded from belonging to the ‘people of Jesus’, or from the ‘flock of Jesus.’ On his part, he calls everyone and every sheep by name (John 10:3 “He calls his own sheep by name”, and “they know his voice”, the voice of One with hundreds of titles). That is fantastic. Nowhere else and at no other time in history, has Jesus been decorated with so many titles. Praise the Lord!
7. For those who formulate or use these titles, Jesus is very real, almost tangible. He is not a controversial or fictitious figure. Jesus is present with them and in them. The social, cultural, political, and religious setting in the Gospels, in which Jesus lived and worked, translates readily to many of the African settings in which the gospel has come to us. For example, Jesus healing the sick; Jesus driving out demons and unwanted spirits; Jesus feeding the hungry; Jesus breaking down prejudices against women; Jesus mixing with all classes and groups of people; Jesus performing miracles (like turning water into wine, raising the dead, and calming the storm on the Lake of Galilee). The society in which he lived and with which he interacted included: the poor and the rich; lepers; prostitutes; children; women; people at the brink of society; the secular authorities and rulers; fishers; farmers and workers on the land; keepers of sheep; religious elite; Roman rulers; traders; builders; temple workers and religious authorities; his critics and followers; families; etc. Traditional African society, in which Christianity is set, has many similarities to the society in which Jesus lived. But of course African society is changing rapidly, and African Christianity is part of that society. However, African Christianity wants to go along, and to keep its Christology along the way. The titles of Jesus depict him with many faces which are also faces in the changing landscape.
8. The titles indicate a clear degree of intimacy between Christians and Jesus. African Christianity is a highly christologised Christianity. This is, however, not an ecclesiastically formulated Christology of any institutional church. It is a spontaneous Christology; a collective Christology; a mass Christology; a lay persons’ Christology; a Christology in the fields; in the streets; in the villages; in Christian homes; in the shops and schools; in the army barracks and police quarters; in the mass media and communication facilities; in the creative arts; in universities and

theological institutions. It is a Christology of the ears, the eyes, the feet, the heart, the mouth, and the tongue. It is a lived and living Christology of African Christianity. It is literally infectious and self-propagating!

We take two examples of the Christological titles and see the setting in which they have arisen, and in which people use or have used them. One comes from Nigeria, which speaks of Jesus as a ‘Bulldozer.’ A Jesuit priest, Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, from Nigeria, who at a time was a teacher and rector of the Hekima College Jesuit School of Theology in Nairobi, Kenya, in his book, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*⁷, uses the name *Jesu Kristi*, and tells of his experience when he presided at the Eucharist in a prison in Benin City, Nigeria. He writes that the prisoners “were charismatic Catholics. For the entrance procession they intoned and passionately sang a song that has never ceased to intrigue me:

Jesus is my bulldozer. Amen! He’s my bulldozer, Amen! Bulldoze my case, O Lord! Amen! He’s my bulldozer, Amen! Bulldoze the lawyer, O Lord! Amen! He’s my bulldozer, Amen! Bulldoze the judge, O Lord! Amen! He’s my bulldozer! Amen! Jesus is my bulldozer, Amen! He’s my bulldozer! Amen!

Father Orobator comments that, “every African Christian . . . faces the challenging task of formulating his or her own answer to the Jesus question . . . The answer will derive from each Christian’s personal encounter of *Jesu Kristi*, rather than from erudite speculations of theologians. Hence, for the imprisoned Christians of Benin City, only a *Jesu Kristi* endowed with the power and force of a bulldozer would do.”

Another example comes from an oral articulation of who Jesus Christ is (was) for a Ghanaian Christian woman, Afua Kuma (1900–1987), (known as Christiana Afua Gyan) who never went to school and could not write. She was a farmer and lived in a forest region of Ghana. She prayed and sang praises to Jesus in the Twi language, which others recorded and transcribed into a small book entitled *Jesus of the Deep Forest*.⁸ The natural physical environment was the setting for her Christological songs and praises, and she uses countless images from both her physical and cultural settings. This comes out powerfully from the very beginning of her book, in which she sets out to “praise the name of Jesus Christ” and “announce his many titles”, which she says are both true and suitable.

7 Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2008), 77.

8 Afua Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest. Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma*, trans. Jon Kirby (Asempa Publishers, Accra, Ghana 1980), 5.

She experiences Jesus as being ‘All powerful’ (the title given to God in many African ethnic groups). Consequently, his deeds are marvellous. Jesus is the Master who rules over the earth. She likens his power to that of the python, which is the strongest snake in the forests where she farmed and lived. He is not easy to be overcome. Another image is that of the Big Boat that cannot be sunk – so is Jesus for her.

In Afua Kuma’s social situation where there might be poor people, Jesus is their Saviour. He gives them encouragement and assurance so that they can smile and laugh in spite of their poverty. She and other believers are bound up with Jesus and rely on him as their hope, just as the tongue relies on the mouth, she says. So she goes on, piling up images of Jesus, images that enable her to know him more closely, to relate to him, to rely on him – as the Great Rock, Forest Canopy, Big Tree, Magnificent Tree, that cares and provides water and food for the traveller. That way, her (their) life is satisfied, and fulfilled, and “We ride in canoes on the water’s surface / And catch our fish!”

So, Kuma can sing praises to Jesus. She is not an exception. She is one voice out of many such voices in Africa which proclaim who Jesus Christ is for them. Oral theology is rich in Christology, and is among other areas where Christianity (the Bible) and African religion meet. It is an intensely creative encounter and is a witness to the vibrant presence of Christianity in Africa today.

“We are going to praise the name of Jesus Christ.
 We shall announce his many titles:
 They are true and they suit him well,
 So, it is fitting that we do this.

All-powerful Jesus
 Who engages in marvellous deeds,
 He is the one called Hero ɔkatakayi!
 Of all earthly dominions, he is the Master;
 The Python not overcome with mere sticks,
 The Big Boat, which cannot be sunk.

Jesus, Saviour of the poor,
 Who brightens up our faces!
 Damfo-Adu: the Clever one,
 We rely on you as the tongue relies on the mouth.

The great Rock we hide behind:
 The great Forest Canopy that gives cool shade:
 The Big Tree which lifts its vines
 To peep at the heavens,
 The Magnificent Tree whose dripping leaves
 Encourage the luxuriant growth below.

Wonderworker, you are the one
Who has carried water in a basket,
And put it by the roadside
For the travellers to drink for three days.
You use the *kono* basket to carry water to the desert,
Then you throw in your net and bring forth fish!
You use the net to fetch water and put it into a basket.
We ride in canoes on the water's surface
And catch our fish!"

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