



## PROLOGUE

# African Christian Theology: *Past, Present, and Future*

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### Abstract

*In this essay, Professor Mugambi reflects on the concepts behind the phrase “African Christian Theology.” Along the way he examines how forms of African Christianity arrived in their current state, highlighting African agency. As he seeks the conceptual core of this label, he promotes the value of theologizing in African vernaculars. After his retrospective musings on African Christian Theology, he turns to the future offerings which African Christianity may provide to the global Church.*

### Resumé

**« Théologie Chrétienne Africaine : Passé, Présent, et Futur »**

*Dans cet essai, le professeur Mugambi réfléchit aux concepts qui sous-tendent l'expression « Théologie Chrétienne Africaine ». En cours de route, il examine comment les formes de christianisme africain sont arrivées à leur état actuel, en mettant en évidence l'action de l'Afrique. Tout en cherchant le noyau conceptuel de cette étiquette, il promeut la valeur de la théologie dans les langues vernaculaires africaines. Après ses réflexions rétrospectives sur la théologie chrétienne africaine, il se tourne vers les offres futures que le christianisme africain pourrait faire à l'Église mondiale.*

### Resumo

**“Teologia Cristã Africana: Passado, Presente, e Futuro”**

*Neste ensaio, o Professor Mugambi reflete sobre os conceitos subjacentes à expressão “Teologia Cristã Africana.” Ao longo do seu percurso, examina como as formas de cristianismo africano chegaram ao seu estado atual, destacando a agência africana. Ao procurar o núcleo conceitual deste rótulo, promove o valor da teologização em vernáculos africanos. Depois das suas reflexões retrospectivas sobre a teologia cristã africana, debruça-*

*se sobre as ofertas futuras que o cristianismo africano pode oferecer à Igreja global.*

## **1. Preamble**

The main focus in this article is **conceptual clarification** about notions implied in the label “African Christian Theology” — which connotes a wide range of assumptions and implications. Most denominations of North American and European Christianity have established their missionary outreach in various African countries, as extensions of their Western denominations. The denominational replicas operate as extensions of the “mother” churches back home in Europe and North America — Adventist, Anglican, Apostolic, Baptist, Charismatic, Roman Catholic, Congregational, Episcopal, Evangelical, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Salvationist, Zionist, and such others. Such labels inevitably imply some alien influence, both linguistically and conceptually. How African is “African Christianity”? This question is open to scholarly discourse.

African expressions of Christianity have resulted from African responses to Western missionary outreach in Africa. David B. Barrett in his book *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968) has documented such contextual responses. He identifies tens of thousands of African Independent churches (AICs) which sprung in reactions against Western denominations across various African countries. They are comparable to the Protestant European denominations that resulted from the Reformation — sparked by Martin Luther following his publication of the *Ninety-Five Theses* against Roman Catholicism.

Five centuries after the European Reformation, African Christianity is articulated in the English language and cultural symbols. The quest for African Christian Theology will come of age only when African languages and symbols become normative among the majority of African Christians. Until then, African Christian Theology will remain tentative, transitory, and experimental. One of the major constraints toward a definitive expression of African Christianity is the history of Christian missions in Africa, intertwined with the history of European colonization of this continent. One of the cultural and religious aftermaths of European imperial domination has been denigration of the African cultural and religious heritage, characterized by the superimposition of Western religious and cultural norms on the African sense of personal and social identity. This challenge is reminiscent of the European Reformation, sparked by Martin Luther in 1517 CE. Hopefully, the Reformation of African Christianity will sooner become normative.

## 2. Introduction

This reflection is in response to a request by the editors of *African Christian Theology* for me to reflect on the “retrospective” aspect of the theme of this issue. My focus is a concise commentary on conceptual core of the theme “African Christian Theology.” I thank Joshua Barron for inviting me to contribute this essay.

This three-word label — *African - Christian - Theology* — is heavily loaded: with multiple meanings, perspectives, concerns, and implications. These three terms are loaded with *vagueness* and *ambiguity*. Each word in this label — *African Christian Theology* — has multiple connotations. The noun “Theology” is derived from the two Greek words — *Theos* (God) and *Logos* (“word” or “reasoning” or “discourse”). In English the word “theology” implies “reasoning” or “reflecting” about “God.” Likewise, the verb “to theologize” means to reflect rationally about a topic within “Theology,” irrespective of denominational commitment. Another noun derived from “theology” is “theologian” — a person who specializes in “Theologizing.” The adjective “theological” may refer to any one of the following three possibilities:

- a) *associated with, or based on, or about theology;*
- b) *relating to, or based on, or about God’s revelation to humankind; or*
- c) *“about God’s nature, God’s designs, and God’s will.”*

There are other adjectives, nouns, and verbs which categorize the multiple uses of the noun “theology.” The label “**African Christian Theology**” refers to the category of “theologizing” that is conducted by African theologians — both lay and ordained — or theologizing by non-African theologians with some interest in the theologizing conducted within Africa by African Christians. Clarifications about presuppositions implied in the trilogy “African Christian Theology” are prone to some inevitable risks — including conceptual vagueness, varying degrees of interpretive clarity, and contextual ambiguity. Such uncertainties blur any discourse and critique about “African Christian Theology.” My role in this essay is an attempt at *conceptual clarification*, based on my understanding and appreciation of the challenge to theologize about this theme — on the basis of my perspective as an African Christian theologian.

## 3. Where on the Global Map is Africa?

The part shaded red on the map below<sup>1</sup> indicates the northern strip of Africa, bordering the Red Sea. The Roman emperors ruled that strip under the Latin name *Africa Proconsularis* or, in ordinary English, the “Roman province of Africa.” During the heyday of the Roman Empire, the word “Africa” referred administratively to this area that borders the Mediterranean Sea — now in Tunisia and Libya. However, even at that time *Africa* was used to refer to the

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Roman\\_Empire\\_-\\_Africa\\_Proconsularis\\_\(125\\_AD\).svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_Empire_-_Africa_Proconsularis_(125_AD).svg)

entire continent.<sup>2</sup> The people of Israel also interacted with “Ethiopians,” as illustrated by the ‘Ethiopian’ dignitary who visited Israel (Acts 8:26–30).<sup>3</sup>

***Africa Proconsularis***



The tendency to isolate North Africa from the rest of this continent is erroneous, because the name of this entire continent is derived from the northern strip — *Africa Proconsularis*. African Union (AU) membership includes all nations of this continent, without exception — northwards from the Southern Cape to the Mediterranean Sea; and eastwards from the Atlantic

<sup>2</sup> E.g., by the first century Roman geographer Pomponius Mela in his *De Situ Orbis* [Latin: ‘On the Situation of the World’].

<sup>3</sup> A word of explanation is needed. In ancient Greek cartography, *Ethiopia* meant simply “land where people with dark skin live.” It referred primarily to Nubia (modern Sudan and South Sudan) and then by extension to all of the continent south of the littoral areas under Roman rule; it could also refer to what are now South India and Sri Lanka as well as to a region between the Black and Caspian Seas where retired Nubian soldiers had established a colony. Luke informs us that the “Ethiopian eunuch” served under the government of “Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.” But “Candace” here is not a name as in English today; it is properly *Kandakē*, a Nubian word that means “ruling queen” and which was the title of the regnal queens of the Nubian kingdom of Meroë. This Nubian government official may have eventually travelled with the gospel to *Aksum*, the heart of what became Ethiopia (modern Eritrea and northern Ethiopia), but he was himself an official of the Nubian government. Some centuries after the New Testament period, after their conversion to the Christian faith, the ancestors of those whom we know as Ethiopians appropriated the names *Ethiopia* and *Ethiopian* to themselves. — *Joshua Robert Barron, managing editor*

Ocean to the Red Sea. The African Union Aspirations expresses this Declaration:

Agenda 2063 seeks to deliver on a set of **Seven Aspirations** each with its own set of goals which if achieved will move Africa closer to achieving its vision for the year 2063. These 7 Aspirations reflect our desire for shared prosperity and well-being, for unity and integration, for a continent of free citizens and expanded horizons, where the full potential of women and youth are realised, and with freedom from fear, disease and want.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, African presence in the Bible — Both the Old Testament and the New Testament — is too remarkable to be overlooked or ignored, because there are biblical narratives that make significant references to Africa.

#### **4. African Christianity as Object for Research**

Much of the research and publication about “African Christianity” has been, and continues to be, conducted by largely foreigners — written in foreign languages, published abroad, and intended for non-African readership. Likewise, a significant percentage of theologians on staff in tertiary institutions within Africa — including seminaries, theological colleges and universities — have been trained by foreigners or trained abroad by foreign staff with limited knowledge about the inner dynamics of Christianity and culture in Africa. The content of many theological books available in Africa — including those *about* Africa — has gaps which isolate the “foreign authors” from their “African readers.” Identity gaps are inevitable whenever *authors* distinguish themselves as the “Subject” and their African *readers* as the “Object” of study — or as the “target” audience for new denominations and mega-churches.

The “Subject-Object” differentiation has its background and setting in the history of Christian missions — alongside the colonial powers throughout this continent. Such differentiation is characterized by denominational spheres of influence throughout all the colonies where Christian denominations were introduced as an integral aspect of imperial expansion. Imperial demarcations of Africa remain intertwined with the denominations and sects from abroad, and some others with African founders. Consequently, the label “African Christianity” is loaded with much vagueness and ambiguity.

Christianity in Africa has a broad spectrum of denominations — including almost all categories found worldwide. In every former colony or protectorate within the continent of Africa, the colonial mainstream denominational legacy remains intact, with newer denominations having smaller proportions of adherents. African Instituted Churches (AICs) have significant presence in some African nations, especially in the former British and French colonies.

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<sup>4</sup> “Agenda 2063,” AU Watch, <https://www.au-watch.org/agenda-2063/>

Megachurches are increasing in both size and their demographic share of African Christians.

The large congregations of megachurches are indicative of organizational skills and effective publicity. Their principal preachers are effective communicators, with support staff to manage the large audiences. Despite the large audiences, the sermons are focused on personal commitment and self-disciplined lifestyle. Effective oratory is one of the essential attractions, in addition to conceptual clarity. Former imperial languages are used for preaching, particularly English (for Anglophone countries) and French (for Francophone countries). Electronic public address gadgetry is used; and some of the megachurches provide online transmission to reach worshippers who might not manage to attend in person. Cities such as Nairobi and Lagos have become favorite host cities for megachurch preachers.

It is worthwhile to reflect about the long-term implications for continued use of foreign languages for worship in African Churches — languages that are not used at home and in social functions. This trend of preaching in foreign imperial languages has a tendency to entrench the notion that worship should be normatively conducted in foreign languages, while “Mother Tongue” is only for used at home. This legacy originated from the history of Western Europe, where Latin was used by the elite and liturgically in Christian worship while “mother tongues” would be used in homes and at work. In the East African Community, Kiswahili has become a lingua franca — understandable by most people and usable both at work and elsewhere. The African Union has also included Kiswahili as one of the official languages.

The training of African scholars toward scholarly theological authorship has hardly been adequate. These shortcomings have resulted in relatively scanty publication of African Christian theological authorship, in both African and foreign languages. The elevation of kiSwahili as one of the official languages of the African Union is one of the significant innovations toward consolidation of African cultural and religious identity. In the same way that Latin became the lingua franca of European Academia, Kiswahili might become a lingua franca of African Academia. Such an innovation, should it materialize, would facilitate the Africanization of Christianity, and the Christianization of Africa. The Churches in Africa have providential opportunity to promote kiSwahili as one of the languages of African Christian theological authorship, teaching, training and research.

##### **5. African Christian *Theology* as Object for Research**

Christian Theology as “Subject” and “African Christians” as “Object” might imply the conceptual “objectification” of African Christians on the one hand, and the researchers about Africa, on the other. Field research is useful and valuable, if conducted with the objective toward some improvement. However, field research has too often been conducted by students as a prerequisite for

passing examinations. It is worthwhile for churches at all levels to conduct research periodically as means to evaluate their own achievements in relation to inputs. Through self-commissioned research, organizations have opportunity to improve their own performance, with due consideration of available resources.

The names and labels of most Christian denominations in Africa remain in foreign languages, hardly amenable to accurate rendering in African languages. Here are some illustrations:<sup>5</sup>

<u>English</u>	<u>Swahili</u>
Africa Inland Church – Kenya	<i>Kanisa la Africa Inland Church Kenya</i>
Anglican Church of Kenya	<i>Kanisa Anglikana la Kenya</i>
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya	<i>Kanisa la Kiinjili la kiLutheri katika Kenya</i>
Presbyterian Church of East Africa	<i>Kanisa la kiPresibetarian la Afrika Mashariki</i>

Almost all the Christian denominations introduced into Africa from Europe and North America have no signboards in African languages; and those with translated signboards have a tendency to use innovations whose background remains unknown — except by the few members who might have studied in a theological college or a Bible School. Consequently, a majority of African Christians are members of denominations with *history* that remains *mystery*, but still relevant for worship in Christianized communities. The foreign-language Catechisms are translated into African languages for the purpose of Baptism and Confirmation, but the history of Western denominations with adherents in Africa remains unknown for the majority of African Christians in mainstream denominations.

Some African church members do not mind the “foreignness” of their churches, mainly because “modernity” is associated with Christianity — which, in turn, is associated with European and North American cultures. Autobiographies have been published, mainly in English, but they are rare exceptions among all denominations. One such exception is by Moderator John G. Gatũ (3 March 1925 – 11 May 2017). He served as an exemplary Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) and was a prominent ecumenist — and also an exemplary mentor. He documented and published his autobiography titled *Joyfully Christian, Truly African* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2006). Gatũ also etched his theological legacy in the proposal for *Moratorium* on Missionary Funds and Personnel, as one strategy to ensure that African churches would attain maturity and rely on their own resources, instead

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<sup>5</sup> It is also telling that the official internet presence (websites and social media profiles) of each of these denominations are only in English; they do not have pages in Swahili or in any of the major African vernaculars (e.g., Kikuyu, Luhya, Dholuo, Kamba, Kalenjin, Gusi, Somali, Meru, Maasai, Turkana) spoken in Kenya. — *the editors*

of remaining dependent on the “mother denominations” that had sent missionaries to Africa.

## **6. Reverse Christian Missionary Outreach from Africa**

European nations that sent their missionaries to Africa are “officially secular” – yet also “nominally Christian.” Missionaries coming from those nations to Africa endeavor to sustain abroad the ecclesial legacy of their predecessors back home. Secularism has become normative in the nations that used to send missionaries to Africa. It is difficult to ascertain whether “African Christianity” will be sustainable, and if so, for how long. The tendency toward “secularism” is looming,<sup>6</sup> at the same time that communication technology increasingly substitutes physical interaction with virtual networks. Physical interaction has become obsolete for some elite, having been replaced with online connectivity. Visa restrictions, though normative, are no longer cumbersome, because instant communication is possible for those who need it — without the hassle of applying for entry permits and visas.

Media channels are readily accessible on mobile phones, making it possible to receive instant news. The world has become a “global village,” particularly for people with access to online connectivity. It might be too early to determine whether “African Christianity” will have the capacity for effective “Reverse Mission” to Europe and North America. International travel is becoming increasingly redundant, replaced by instant connectivity. It is now possible for preachers in Europe and North America to instantly broadcast their sermons to Africa and elsewhere. Similar “Reverse Mission” from Africa to elsewhere is also possible.<sup>7</sup> The missing link is readiness, at both ends, to appreciate that the era of physical missionary outreach has become overtaken by online communication.

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<sup>6</sup> For a critique of assumptions that the tide of secularism is fated to overwhelm religiosity in general and Christianity specifically, see Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 249–273. On the interplay of secularism and Christian witness, see Mechteld Jansen, “Christian Mission and Secularism,” chapter 28 in *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, edited by Kirsteen Kim and Alison Fitchett-Climenhaga, 493–510 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). On secularism and Christianity in Africa, see Dick See, “Western Secularism, African Worldviews, and the Church,” *Cairo Journal of Theology* 2 (2015): 76–87; and Benno van den Toren and Willem J. de Wit, “Secularization and Discipleship in Africa: Conclusions and Recommendations,” *Cairo Journal of Theology* 2 (2015): 152–160. — *the editors*

<sup>7</sup> There is a growing literature documenting the reality of African mission work in Europe and America. See, for example, Paul Araoluwa Ayokunle’s review of Johnson Ambrose Afrane-Twum, *Christian Mission in a Diverse British Urban Context: Crossing the Racial Barrier to Reach Communities*, in this issue. — *the editors*



The imbalance of Power and Influence may make it difficult for Africa to re-evangelize Europe and North America — as reciprocation for the Missionary Enterprise, especially during the twentieth century. Visa restrictions, racial attitudes, and resistance to criticism are some of the factors that can make “reverse” or “reciprocal” missions from Africa to Europe and North America difficult. It is ironical that Western missionaries keep coming to Tropical Africa, where Christianity is already established — complete with churches and cathedrals, schools and hospitals, universities and colleges, conventions and conferences — while there is a major recession of Christian presence in their own countries of origin.

### 7. “Africa Christianity” or “Christianity in Africa”?

The two labels — *African Christianity* and *Christianity in Africa* — have different connotations. Missionaries brought **European Christianity** into Africa. After a while, the African converts internalized the Gospel, and became African Christians. European Christianity became out-of-place among African people who had acquired access to the Gospel — and now happily apply it within their African contexts. It seems likely that **African Christianity** will influence the **Secularizing West**. The **Holy Spirit** requires neither an air ticket nor a visa to travel abroad. Communities of Faith can interact instantly; and the Holy Spirit will guide the interactions accordingly. European Christianity reached Africa and within a short while, African Christianity had come of age. African Christianity will reach the West, and the Holy Spirit will do the rest.

These two labels — *Christianity in Africa* and *African Christianity* — are not synonyms but have different conceptual emphases. The first label, *Christianity in Africa*, often refers to the package that missionaries introduced and inculcated into African converts who would have to mimic missionary teaching, because of a presupposition that African culture was “primitive”: that is, “depraved” and “heathen.” Such derogatory adjectives as *primitive*, *depraved*, and *heathen* appear in the reports of Western missionaries in Africa. In contrast, many of the African converts, after reading the Bible for themselves, appreciated and internalized the insight that the Holy Spirit can never be claimed and confined as a monopoly of any culture or empire. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit empowers converts of every culture, ethnicity, or status to accept and internalize the essence of the Gospel, and also to share the Word of God among those not yet converted.

The spread of Christianity in Tropical Africa has been mainly the achievement of African converts. While the stories of missionary activity have been more frequently told in the western press and church history textbooks, the larger share of mission work in Africa was performed by African Christians, and not by western missionaries.<sup>8</sup> It has become a routine for evangelical and

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<sup>8</sup> On this point, see Jehu J. Hanciles’s article in this issue. — *the editors*

charismatic speakers from Europe and North America to visit Africa on preaching itineraries, attracting large audiences. The large audiences are perhaps more for curiosity and entertainment than for conviction and conversion. Most of the audiences in such rallies are already Christians, who attend with intention to learn how Christianity is conducted outside Africa.

#### **8. The Future of “Africa Christianity” and “Christianity in Africa”**

The old “colonial” dispensation of “Christianity in Africa” had its role in Tropical Africa, and through it some Africans accepted the Christian faith within the competing denominations. At the same time some Africans established their own denominations which were condemned as “anti-Christian.” These dynamics flourished while the ecumenical movement was gaining momentum. The Gospel, like mustard seeds planted or scattered in fertile soil, will germinate and become trees of many varieties, transforming the cultural ecology of the society. Any attempts to confine the Gospel in the cultural norms and molds of missionaries eventually flounder. Some converts discern the essence of the Gospel and after training they take over the initiative to share their experience of conversion with their fellows in the community.

The entries in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* contain many illustrations of this insight; and similarly, the *Journal of African Christian Biography* contains articles on this theme.<sup>9</sup> African Christian scholarship is gaining momentum, in both imperial and African languages.<sup>10</sup> One of the most significant achievements in the maturation of African Christianity is Professor John S. Mbiti’s translation of the New Testament from the Greek into his home language, kiKamba: *Utianiyo wa Mwiyai Yesu Kilisto* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 2014). With this achievement, John S. Mbiti (1931–2019) became the pioneer in the next phase toward maturation of African Christianity. Western publications on Africa have frequently been rather condescending, especially during the era of imperial domination. But such condescendence has encouraged African scholars to research and publish their works from African perspectives. In response to such achievement, among others, Professor John S. Mbiti cites the remark by Jesus to the Pharisees:

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<sup>9</sup> The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) is available online at <https://dacb.org/> and regularly updated with new entries; DACB also published the *Journal of African Christian Biography* (JACB), which is published four times a year and is available online at <https://dacb.org/journal/>

<sup>10</sup> For the European languages, the proliferation and success of book series published by the Western press but devoted to aspects of African Christianity and predominately publishing African voices demonstrate this clearly; e.g., African Christian Studies Series or AFRICS (Pickwick Publications), ASET (Africa Society of Evangelical Theology) Series (Langham Global Library), African Theological Studies / Études Théologiques Africaines (Peter Lang), Bible and Theology in Africa (Peter Lang), among many others. — *the editors*

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Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. (Matt 21:42–43).

This reminder by Jesus is an appropriate message with which to conclude my reflection. Africa was represented from the beginning of Christianity, and continues to proclaim the Gospel within the limits of available capabilities and resources. The term African Christianity refers to the broad spectrum of African Christian responses to the Gospel — Adventist, Anglican, Catholic, Charismatic, Episcopal, Independent, Interdenominational, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Reformed. Each of these denominational clusters focuses on some perspectives of biblical teaching. It is impossible for any denomination (or cluster of denominations) can claim to be comprehensive about the teachings of Jesus Christ. The greatest challenge facing Christian Leadership in the twenty-first century is modesty to admit the limitation of perspectives — appreciating the fact that no single perspective is comprehensive in its endeavor to comply with demands of the Gospel. The least achievable challenge is to *do the best*, while praying that *God will do the rest*.

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