

John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was it Rooted in his African heritage?

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Abstract

This research article sets out on the premise that African theology, as was propounded by the likes of John Mbiti (1931–2019), is historically seen as synonymous with African ubuntu (cultural-sensitive, humane and community-focused) theology. Mbiti is undoubtedly the father of Africa's indigenous theology that puts much emphasis on societal concerns rather than individual concerns. He is a scholar who contextualised it as an academic discipline right from its formative stages to its current status in our theo-paradigmatic market. In his ubuntu (humane) theological articulation, he employs an inclusive model that demonstrates the three-fold approaches in African theology: oral, written, and symbolic theology. He also vouches for a symbiotic relationship between the gospel and culture, in an endless rhythm for their respective survival. While urging that Africa's ubuntu theology cannot be excluded from the catholicity of the church, as it is kerygmatically universal but theologically provincial, one wonders whether he compromised the originality of the former. Through the use of historical-analytical design, this article attempts to retrace Mbiti's contribution as it strives to understand his methodological considerations. Was it rooted in the Ibadan Conferences of 1958 and 1966, or is it a mere progression from the earlier initiatives by the works of Kenyatta (1938) and Tempels (1945)? In appearing dismissive of the Black theology of South Africa and other liberation theologies, did he miss out on his otherwise inclusive (ubuntu) approach? The material in this presentation was gathered through a critical review of Mbiti's selected works and from interviews that were conducted with some people who came from Mbiti's Mulago village, Kitui County, Kenya.

Keywords: Mbiti's theology; African theology; Africa's ubuntu theology; African heritage



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Introduction

John Samuel Mbiti (1931–2019) was the first-born son of Mutuvi Ngaangi and Velesi Mbandi (Mbiti 2020, 1). His other siblings were Meliki Mbithe, Willy Mutuvi, Maillu Mutuvi, Lenah Musangi John, and Margaret Mwikali Mwangangi. Although he was the only professor in the Ngaangi lineage, his brother (Maillu) was a lecturer in commerce and economics at the University of Nairobi. Margaret Mwikali, who married Mwangangi Muli, was a trained teacher (Interview, Kyalo 13 March 2020). Others were equally active in their respective areas as farmers and business people. Mbiti's wife was called Verena Mbiti-Siegenthaler (a language teacher and social worker), whom he met during his later studies at Cambridge (1960 to 1963 when he earned his PhD in New Testament Studies) and with whom he had been married from 1965 to 2019 when Mbiti passed away. His four children were Kyeni, Maria, Esther, and Anna-Kavata (Interview, Kyalo 13 March 2020). At the time of his death (2019), Mbiti's children were all working. One was already in the arts, a second one was an industrial designer, a third one was an art teacher, while the fourth one was a potter and a sculptor. By 2019, Mbiti had five grandchildren (Mbiti 2020).

Mbiti comes from one of the 22 clans that make up the Kamba nation of Kenya, the Akitondo. Others clans include the Aombe (largest), Atangwa, Ethanga, Atwii, Aambua, Amuuti, Amutei, Aanziu, Ekuua, Akanga, Aini, Amwei, Euani, Mulea itema, Amuunda, Akitutu, Anzauni, Akimii, Aumoni, Angwina, and Amiw'a (Interview, Ngali 14 March 2020). In the case of Mbiti's Akitondo clan, they also call themselves Makila (which means incorruptible people). This compares with Upper Volta, which was part of the then French West Africa (from 1896 to 1960) and which adopted the name Burkina Faso in 1984, during the leadership of Thomas Sankara (1949–1987). It means that Burkinabe people are incorruptible. As most of my interviewees noted, John Mbiti's lifetimes were incorruptible; hence he lived up to the ideals of his own ancestors in his Akitondo clan and especially the lineage of Ngaangi (*Mbari ya Ngaangi*). He was appreciated in his own hometown of Mulango, where he had put up a moderate storey building; and where the top floors were given out as rental houses, while the lower houses were rented as shops by the local people (Interview, Ngali 14 March 2020). He was largely seen as “a local” person in his Mulango village, even though he had settled abroad (Switzerland) since the 1970s. Whenever he came to Mulango village, he was always given a chance to address the locals or even offered a chance to preach in the local churches, the African Inland Mission (AIC) or the Anglican Church. During all of his over 40 years' stay in Switzerland, Mbiti ensured that he visited his rural home at least twice a year and ensured that he interacted with his local villagers well, as he also learnt from them (Interview, Kyalo 13 March 2020). This partly explains his mastery of Kamba literature, which remained strong to the very last moment.

Critically important is the fact that Mbiti wrote a Kamba story book, *Mutungana Ngewa Yake* (Mbiti 1967) (meaning, Mutunga and his story) during his high school days in the 1950s, though published in the mid-1960s. It is the most read and popular Kamba story book in his mother tongue (Interview, Ngali 14 March 2020). It was used in lower

primary schools for vernacular instruction in some of the counties in Kenya (Makueni, Machakos, and Kitui), dominated by the Akamba linguistic group. In an interview with a close neighbour of the Mbiti's, it was established that he was constantly accompanied by his daughter during his Mulango-Kitui home visits. They could stay in their moderate buildings with the rest of his extended family members. Additionally, he had moderate houses for all his children in the Mulango village home; hence he ensured that his children did not lose their ancestral roots, even though their mother came from Swiss ancestry (Interview, Kyalo 13 March 2020).

Mbiti died on Saturday, 5 October 2019, in Burgdorf, Switzerland, aged 88, while undergoing treatment. His death rekindled the ubuntu (communal and inclusive) trajectory after it was discovered that he had written a will that indicated his wish to satisfy his two constituencies (Swiss and Kenyan citizenships) (Mbiti 2021, 1). In a nutshell, his will explained that he preferred cremation, which is largely seen as a Western concept, after which the ash would be buried in the two countries in equal share. The idea of equal share speaks volumes about Mbiti's ubuntu (inclusive) living and his will to extend it beyond Africa (Interview, Kyalo 13 March 2020). This symbolic gesture did not, however, address the ambiguities of living ubuntu (inclusive, humane and communal) in diverse non-ubuntu contexts of the world. How can we apply our ubuntu theology in terrorist prone parts of Africa (northern Nigeria and Somalia) and in light of the Russia-Ukraine conflict that began when the former invaded the latter on 24 February 2022? How can we apply the principles of ubuntu theologies of communality, embracing the humanity of others, care and inclusivity in xenophobic corners of the world? Or, as the Psalmist (137:4) lamented while in Babylonian captivity: "How can we sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land?"

Apart from his scholarly prowess, Mbiti's priestly role is largely given a peripheral role. Nevertheless, he was a full-time pastor of the Swiss Reformed Churches in the Parish of Burgdorf in the Canton of Bern from 1981 to 1996, when he retired. He also worked as a part-time and trustee professor of missiology and non-European theology (ecumenism and mission) at the University of Bern until 2003 (Mbiti 2022; Interview, Ngali 14 March 2020). Previously (1964–1974), he was a lecturer (1964–1967) and a professor (1968) who taught at Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda. He was the professor and director of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey in Castle. The latter was an establishment of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Bogis-Bossey, Celigny (Switzerland). Due to his huge academic achievements in the field of theology and religious studies, he received four honorary doctorates and diverse other honours globally (Mbiti 2022; Interview, Ngali 14 March 2020).

During Mbiti's (ash) burial ceremony on 2 November 2019 at Mulango-Kitui County, speaker after speaker celebrated his lifetime by describing him as humane, communal-minded, humble, hospitable, and a great public educator. The then Makueni Governor, Prof. Kivutha Kibwana, proposed that a school be built and be named after him, just as in the case of Prof. Wangari Maathai, the first African Woman Nobel Laureate, who

passed away on 25 September 2011. Mbiti's daughter told the gathering that he did not seek to be loved but chose to love others instead; never sought to be forgiven but to forgive others; to be consoled but was quick to console others; was not keen to be heard but was quick to hear others. His love, humility and hospitality, where he shared some of his property with the locals, were highlighted during this sombre moment (Mbiti 2021; Interview, Ngali 14 March 2020).

African Religions and Philosophy: A Launching of Ubuntu Theology?

John Samuel Mbiti's (1931–2019) ubuntu theology was “officially” launched in 1969 when he released his authoritative book, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Mbiti 1969). Although he did not use the word “ubuntu” in this book or generally in his published works, his use of African proverbs did not escape his local Kamba proverb: *Mundu ni mundu nundu wa andu*, or his neighbouring Kikuyu saying: *Mundu ni mundu niundu wa andu*, which compares with Nguni speakers' dictum: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*—that is, “a person is a person through other persons” (*Est homo per alios homines*) (Gathogo 2001, 21; Schutte 2001, 46). In this book, Mbiti seemingly summed up the concept of ubuntu (humane, community-minded and a caring approach to issues) when he made his famous quote: “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am” (*Ego sum quia sumus; et quia sumus, ergo sum*) (Mbiti 1969, 108). In other words, he subtly ruled out the Western concept as espoused by Rene Descartes' philosophical approach: “I am therefore I exist” (*cogito ergo sum*). As a theologian, John Mbiti was primarily introducing his ubuntu theology of communality as opposed to the individualisation of theology.

This aphorism, which expresses a traditional African ethic (called ubuntu), implies that none of us (as theologians or as members of society) comes into the world fully formed; we will always need “others.” Equally, no Christian theology is complete without deeper interactions with the contextual and contemporary needs of the respective community of faith. In other words, Africa's ubuntu theology, as implied in Mbiti's works, builds on relational theology, which necessitates a deeper dialogue between people's experiences and indigenous resources of the African peoples, as the hallmark of authentic Christian faith in tropical Africa. It also points to the importance of celestial and human hospitality, which is an ideal goal and trajectory of being in Africa, as it acknowledges both the humanity of others and the theo-social diversity of others as God's plan for the world. Ubuntu theology, in Mbiti's works, is dialogical, inclusive, community-driven, humane, just, and methodologically contextual and reconstructive in its motif.

Further, John Mbiti's ubuntu theology is clearly seen in his theological typology. In his 1986 publication, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Mbiti 1986, 46), he acknowledges three distinct theologies in Africa, including the written, the oral, and the symbolic. Appreciating that the privileged elites of Africa have the written theology, he also acknowledges that the masses of untrained readers of the Bible and the general masses of the people who have not attended a theological school, also propound oral

theologies through songs, dances, sermons, prayers and through general conversations. Certainly, even the writing theologians do pray, sing, dance, engage in gospel music or engross themselves in oral discourses. The masses of people who cannot express theology in foreign languages, such as English and French, are largely the ones who consume oral theologies. Equally, symbolic theology (which is largely consumed by the masses, as in the former) is evidently seen through drama, dance, ritual, symbols, and art. Rooted in Africa's inclusive heritage (ubuntu), the above three typologies, in Mbiti's (1969; 1986) view, are only authentic if they are rooted in the community; hence they must not exist for their own individualistic reasons but for the greater good of the community. Although individual concerns cannot be swept under the carpet, communal responsibilities take precedence and inform the written, symbolic and oral theologies. With these three theological typologies, Mbiti's ubuntu theology demonstrates the community-driven nature of the African worldview, a phenomenon where everyone is ideally welcomed to the dinner table.

However, looking at liberation theologies against his ubuntu (communal inclusivity) theological backdrop, Mbiti found himself nearly isolated by liberationist theologians when he appeared dismissive of their "exclusivism." For, hasn't the God of Christendom invited everyone to fix the many broken walls around us in 20th century Africa and beyond (cf. Galatians 3:28; Nehemiah 2:18)? Such dismissiveness of a non-inclusive theological trajectory drove some of his fellow African theologians, such as Nthamburi (1991), Tutu (1979), Buthelezi and Cone (in Wilmore and Cone 1979) to express their discomfort with him; especially when he said that South Africa did not need liberation theology, rather it needed liberation from the shackles of apartheid (Mbiti in Wilmore and Cone 1979, 176). In his ubuntu theological perspective, he held the view that authentic theology is that which "grows out of our joy in the experience of the Christian faith" rather than from the bitterness and pains of oppression that he felt was evident in liberation theologies in apartheid South Africa, Latin America and in North America's Black theology (Mbiti in Wilmore and Cone 1979, 177). Undoubtedly, such a view could be contested on the basis that there have been pockets of oppression and general intolerance even among some post-independent governments of tropical Africa, especially before the introduction of political pluralism that swept across Africa in the early 1990s. In turn, multiparty democracy in the 1990s ushered in liberalised political discourses. Clearly, the leaderships of Jean-Bédél Bokassa, also known as Bokassa I (1921–1996) and others, who were despotic and intolerant to dissenting voices, would crush the dissenting voices to death; and this pattern was all too common in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s (Gathogo 2001). Bokassa, for instance, was coroneted as an emperor of the Central African Republic on 4 December 1977. In Uganda, Idi Amin Dada Oumee (1925–2003), a Ugandan military officer, who was equally full of *Ubulwane/Unyama* (bestly behaviour that insults communal well-being) in his political discourses, served as the state president from 1971 to 1979. He was derogatorily referred to as "the Butcher of Uganda." Mobutu Seseko of the present day Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), formerly Zaire, is another case in point (Gathogo 2001). In Cameroon, Jean-Marc Ela (1936–2008), arguably the leading African liberation theologian outside

South Africa, and the author of the *African Cry*, was eventually forced into exile in the city of Montreal, in the Canadian Province of Quebec, after the killing of his fellow vocal critic of political and ecclesiastical context in Cameroon. His fellow vocal and fellow liberal Cameroonian priest, Englebert Mveng, was thus killed by government operatives in 1995, a phenomenon that saw him leave Cameroon in the same year. Ela served as a professor of sociology at the University of Laval, Montreal, until his death in Vancouver, British Columbia Province of Canada, on 26 December 2008 (Gathogo 2011).

Despite such oppressive situations in some post-independent African countries, African theology was still articulated with or without joy or bitterness that existed in tropical Africa. In other words, African theologians did not have to wait for an opportune moment or “joyful moment” so as to do theology (Gathogo 2020a, 29). Hence, Mbiti’s (quoted in Wilmore and Cone 1979, 176) inclusive, humane and community-minded (ubuntu) theology irked some proponents of Africa’s liberation theology due to its neutral and insensitive stance when dealing with contextual needs. As Desmond Tutu once cautioned, we cannot be neutral in “situations of injustice, [for] you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral [or inclusive to both wheat and tares], the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality” (Tutu 2009, 1). In other words, critiquing Mbiti’s ubuntu theology shows that there are times when joy to one is not always joy to all, as is commonly seen in the African heritage.

As will be noted, Mbiti’s (1969; 1970; 1975a&b; 1986) community-driven (ubuntu) theological trajectory is largely a by-product of his African heritage and his theological education. This communalistic perspective in African theological discourses, as seen in Mbiti’s works, reminisces of Bakongo’s conversion and proselytisation into Portuguese Roman Catholic Christianity in the 16th century. In particular, the Portuguese succeeded in converting and proselytising the Congolese when they converted King Afonso I (1456–1543) to their Roman Catholic Christianity (Gathogo 2020b,11). Just after Afonso I’s transformation to Christianity, the Portuguese were encouraged to see the whole kingdom now professing Roman Catholic Christianity as was presented and introduced by them (Gathogo 2020b, 11). This led the Congolese aristocratic leadership to embrace the “Portuguese titles, coats of arms, dress styles and their new names” (Gathogo 2020b, 11). Further, some Congolese were sent to Portugal so as to learn the latter’s way of life and their version(s) of education. With time, the kingdom began to observe Christian festivals such as Lent and Ash Wednesday, which start in early March and end in mid-April of every year; Epiphany, which takes place every year on 6 January; Christmas Day, which takes place every year on 25 December; Advent Sunday, which is the fourth Sunday before Christmas; All Saints’ Day, which takes place every year on 1 November; Ascension day, which is the 40th day of Easter; Easter day, which is largely observed on a Sunday between 22 March and 25 April; and Good Friday, which is the Friday before Easter. The Congolese kingdom also witnessed the establishment and opening of churches.

This was followed by the big boom, a phenomenon where craftsmen (no women then) made Christian artefacts that were easily found by 19th century European missionaries (Fromont 2014). Equally, Sir Henry Morton Stanley (1841–1904)—a Welsh-American explorer who in 1881 teamed up with an African ex-slave, Abdullah Susi c1856–1891, to found Leopoldville station at the mouth of river Congo—renamed Kinshasa city in the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo, also noted these Christian artefacts of the 16th century (Gathogo 2021b,11). Such reminiscent tales compare with Mbiti’s ubuntu theology, where the joy of one is seen as joy for the rest of the community, and oppression for one is equally seen as oppression for everyone else—a development that can easily be conceptualised in his trio notion of culture, religion, and the gospel of Christ. Perhaps, in his bid to take his ubuntu theology beyond Africa, he first saw Africa as the starting point and eventually attempted to drive a theo-inclusive agenda forward. Perhaps his dismissal of “exclusive” liberation theologies (as in the case of Black theologies of South Africa and North America) comes from this background, which could turn out as his weakest link—a link that appears to have ignored the contextual nature of Christian theology across the centuries.

Conceptual Clarification

With religion permeating all departments of life (including ethics, aesthetics, kinship, economics, politics, and religion), Mbiti’s ubuntu theology cannot be articulated by isolating culture from religion or vice versa. Equally, ubuntu theology cannot be isolated from the numerous facets that form the pillars of Africa’s religio-culture. These include sonics, symmetric, graphics, chromatics, practical tools, and theoretical tools (referring to logics), among others (Mugambi 1989, 129–131).

Smart’s (1996) dimensions of religion fall within this scheme of ubuntu theology, as it embraces the humanity of others. In turn, Ninian Smart’s dimensions of religion include:

- **Ritual and practical dimensions**, as in the case of the Passover ritual that is celebrated by the Jews or the Eucharist celebration by Christians.
- **Narrative and mythical dimensions**, which are stories and allegories or personifications of natural phenomena, as in the case of the Christian myth of the miraculous birth of Jesus between 6–4 BCE by a rural virgin named Mary.
- **Experiential and emotional dimensions** that involve bliss, inner peace, ecstasy, devotion, mystery, liberation, awe, guilt, and dread.
- **Social and institutional dimensions** that involve a belief system that is shared collectively. For example, as in the case of the Islamic Umma or brethren in Christianity who sometimes view others outside their group as enemies, pagans, non-believers and so on, even though their communal solidarity as in the African religiosity see the joy or pain of a member as a shared matter.
- **Ethical and legal dimensions**, which refer to the rules about human behaviour that are supposedly revealed from the supernatural realm, as in the case of the Ten Commandments and Torah among Christians and Sharia among Muslims.

- **Doctrinal and philosophical dimensions** that systematically formulate religious teachings in an intellectually coherent form, as in the case of the Bible as a sacred book for Christians, Hebrew scriptures for Judaism, Vedas and Bhagavad-Gita for Hinduism, and Koran or Quran for Islam, whose “revealed” statuses contain religious philosophy, which is doctrinally expressed as in the case of Trinity for Christians (Gathogo 2013b).

Apart from the trinity, Christianity has other doctrines that seek to give meaning to creation, incarnation, salvation, grace, and so on. These doctrinal and philosophical dimensions have a wide and collective appeal. The material dimension (which refers to tangible things that are linked to religion and ordinary objects or places that symbolise or manifest the sacred or supernatural, as in the case of church buildings) is another critical dimension of religion that is in continuum with Mbiti’s ubuntu theology. It also captures the communal dimension, as tangible things and materials exist for the community and not necessarily for personal reasons (cf. Mbiti 1986).

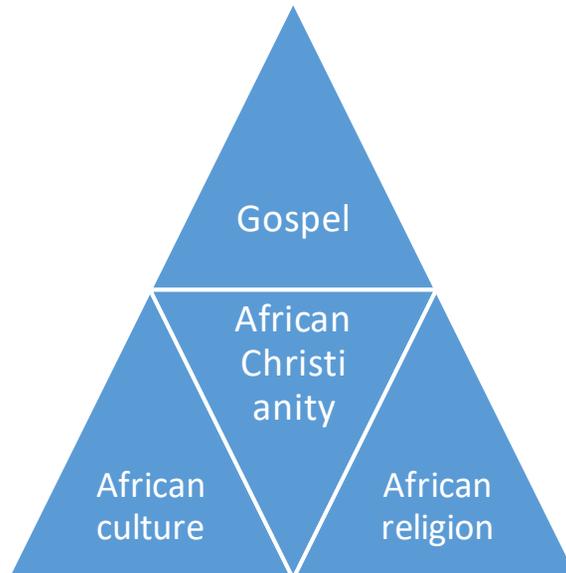


Figure 1: Dimensions of religion

Mbiti and the Birth of Africa’s Ubuntu Theology

Undoubtedly, John Samuel Mbiti (1931–2019) is the father of African theology and indeed the person who systematically nurtured it as an academic discipline right from its formative stages. Although the birth and the nurturing of African theology were experienced through research, publications, and scholarly conferences, since the late 1950s, the publication of Mbiti’s authoritative book, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Mbiti 1969) took the debate a notch higher. Indeed, it ably clarified some elements of

the African heritage that had been misrepresented by the early European writers, as in the case of Edward Tylor, who wrongly saw African religiosity as animistic. Mbiti's (1969) publication prepared the critical ground for Africa's ubuntu theology, even though such phrases were not initially used. It certainly went beyond an earlier book by Tempels (1945), the *Bantu Philosophy (La Philosophie Bantoue)*, which argued that the Bantu peoples of Africa south of the Sahara had implicit philosophy that is logically sensible.

Published by a Belgian missionary, *Bantu Philosophy (La Philosophie Bantoue)* could not, however, satisfy the holistic African concerns as Mbiti's 1969 publication did. Likewise, Kenyatta published his book on religio-cultures of the African people, with reference to the Kikuyu of Kenya, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu People* (Kenyatta 1938), which also prepared the ground for both Tempels and Mbiti's publications. Like Mbiti and Tempels, Kenyatta (1938) had earlier underlined the value of community-mindedness in understanding Africa's religio-culture and worldview. The book, which was banned from being used in Ireland, was described by Bronislaw Malinowski, a celebrated British anthropologist, as a "first-hand account of a representative African culture, as an invaluable document in the principles underlying culture-contact and change; and as a personal statement of the new outlook of a progressive African ..." (Kenyatta 1938, ii).

As an insider in African discourses, Mbiti had the full authority, knowledge, and intellectual wherewithal to go beyond Tempels (1945) and even Kenyatta (1938), who had no theological background and eventually provided a clear platform that went on to portray the African heritage as the raw material for the gospel in an African context. Even though he later "lamented" that Christianity had made strong penetration on the soul of Africa, yet Africa had slowed down in Africanising Christianity, he had already prepared the ground through his research and systematic reflection of African religion and culture, most of which had already gotten published by 1975.

Mbiti's contemporaries in African theological discourses have retraced the birth of African theology by exploring various schools of thought. Mugambi (1995, 45) traces the birth of African theology to the 1950s. Mugambi (1995) brings up the idea that African Christian theology traces its birth to the 1958 All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) meeting at Ibadan, Nigeria. This ecumenical conference came shortly after the meeting of politicians (African nationalists) had taken place in Accra, Ghana, under the auspices of the All Africa People's Conference (AAPC). AAPC prepared the ground for the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), renamed African Union, in 2002. The OAU meeting was launched in 1963 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, while the All Africa Conference of Churches was launched in Kampala in 1963 (Mugambi 1995,45). Likewise, Nthamburi (1991, 1) felt that the launching of AACC in Kampala, Uganda, in 1963 gave impetus to the quest for *theologia Africana*. Three years later (1966), the historical beginnings of African Christian theology could be traced from the first theological consultation by African scholars that was held in

Ibadan in 1966. Its key idea was to map out strategies for dialoguing the gospel with Africa's religio-culture. As a result, the 1966 conference of African theologians produced a book (*Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*), in which presented papers ended up as book chapters. This premier book was edited by Dickson and Ellingworth (1969, 1971).

Ibadan Conference of 1966

In his presentation on 4 June 2003 at the University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa, Mbiti (2003, 1) contended that "African theology" is an inclusive enterprise which is simultaneously African and Christian, as it stems from African-Christians. He went on to draw its historicity by demonstrating that the African church (a by-product of African theology) is within the four marks of the universal church of Christ (One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic). In view of this, he further demonstrated the provincial and contextual nature of Christian theology and the universal appeal of the gospel that cuts across cultures that it seeks to convert. In this 2003 presentation, Mbiti (2003,1) went on to explain that theology began in Africa during the Apostolic times, thereby attempting to give historical root to Africa's ubuntu theology. The coming of the Egyptian and Alexandrian and/or North African church in as early as 45 AD/CE did not easily display the communal nature of Africa's ubuntu theology, as it is largely seen as a Western church whose hatching was done on African soil. Mbiti (2003,1) did not highlight the Donatist Christianity of the 6th century that attempted to indigenise Christianity in Africa before being crushed by the Roman colonies. As he noted in his 2003 presentation, these early stages, however, earned plentiful fruits in the course of history. At the conference that was held at Immanuel College in Ibadan (Nigeria), scholars presented academic papers that encouraged dialogue between the gospel and the African heritage and were eventually published into a book. In view of this, Mbiti (2003), who easily struck a working chord with Nthamburi (1991) and Mugambi (1995), stressed that he formed part of the Ibadan delegates of January 1966 that ushered in a new dawn for Africa's ubuntu theology. He noted that the conference was convened under the auspices of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC)—a feat that shows the critical role of AACC in developing an African theology.

By insisting that the 1966 Ibadan Conference was an ecumenical gathering, Mbiti (2003) further demonstrated the importance of joint ventures across the denominational divides in developing Africa's ubuntu theology. In turn, and as noted earlier, it puts more emphasis on community. Certainly, it resonates with Christ's prayer for unity (cf. John 17:21). The Ibadan meeting thus brought the Coptic Church, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and the Methodists to one African theological dinner table. Besides this, they came from all corners of Africa, with the exception of South Africa, which was being sanctioned due to its racist apartheid laws. In demonstrating Africa's humane cultures of inclusivity and hospitality that are ideally extended to everyone (including strangers, as needs may dictate), they also invited a few guests from Britain, and generally people from Europe and American continents. They also hired interpreters for French and English, thereby ushering in inclusivity via a good communication matrix. It remains a

historical landmark and indeed a curtain raiser as “we met for the first time on our own soil, with our own hoes, our own seeds and our own agenda [to plant Africa’s ubuntu theology]. The theme of the consultation was ‘Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs’” (Mbiti 2003, 2). Although there had been previous meetings, as in the case of the Ibadan Conference of 1958 and the Kampala conference of 1963 that saw the birth of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), the January 1966 Ibadan Conference was the most climactic as it almost made an official launch of Africa’s ubuntu theology as an academic course of study in our seminaries and universities. The publication of the conference proceedings, as *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (Dickson and Ellingworth 1969, 1971) clearly provided a starting point that went hand-in-hand with Mbiti’s publication of *African Religions and Philosophy* (Mbiti 1969), both of which brought closer the reality of an African ubuntu theology.

Despite lacking women participants in the Ibadan Conference of 1966, Kenya was well represented by the able intellectual leadership of John Mbiti, whose prolific writings climaxed into his being seen as the de-facto founder of Africa’s ubuntu theology. He used the medium of publication to clarify gospel and Africa’s religio-cultures to the extent that he was later seen as the major point of reference on these shores. Others who attended the Ibadan January 1966 Conference included: Vincent Mulago from the present day the Democratic Republic of Congo; R. Buana Kibongi from Congo-Brazzaville; Harry Sawyer from Sierra Leone; Swailem Sidhom from Egypt; E. Bolaji Idowu from Nigeria; Samuel A. Amisshah from Ghana; Kwesi A. Dickson from Ghana; E. A. Adeolu Adegbola from Nigeria; and S. N. Ezeanya from Nigeria. Most of these 10 scholars ended up authoring several books on the subject related to Africa’s ubuntu theology. Vincent Mulago authored *Africanite et Evangelisation* in 1975 and *Theologie Africaine et Problemes Connexes* in 2007, among others. Immediately after the Ibadan Conference, Mulago launched his Centre for the Study of African Religions (“Centre d’Étude des Religions Africaines”) in 1966 at the Jesuit University, Lovanium, Kinshasa. E. Bolaji Idowu (1913–1995), a Methodist theologian, authored *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, in 1973; *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, in 1982; and *Towards an Indigenous Church*, in 1965, among other relevant publications.

Idowu’s 1965 publication regarding an indigenous church was more explicit on what an African ubuntu church would ideally appear like. In this book, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (Idowu 1965), Idowu, a co-founder of Africa’s ubuntu theology, cautions that unless the churches founded by the European missionary societies are able to adapt their worship, hymnody, clerical dresses, liturgy, and most importantly, their attitudes to the cultic and psychological needs of Africa, they may suffer the same fate as the churches of North Africa in the early centuries of the Christian era. Harry Alphonso Ebus Sawyer (1909–1986), an Anglican theologian, authored (with William Thomas Harris) *The Springs of Mende Beliefs and Conduct* (Harris and Sawyer 1968), *Creative Evangelism: Towards a new Christian Encounter with Africa* (Sawyer 1968); and *God: Ancestor or Creator? Aspects of Traditional Belief in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone* (Sawyer 1970, 1971), among other relevant publications. Similarly, Archbishop Stephen Nweke

Ezeanya authored an article, “The Osu (Cult-Slave) System in Igbo Land” on 1 January 1967, which appeared in the *Journal of Religion in Africa* (Ezeanya 1967, 35–45). These post-Ibadan 1966 publications, from most of the 10 attendees, provided further direction on the new trajectory that informs the current African theological discourses.

Although the Ibadan Conference of 1966 did not use the term “African theology” or “African Christian theology,” it still turned out to be the proverbial stone that the builders rejected, but eventually ended up as the most important cornerstone that held the house (African Christianity) together (Psalm 118:22). In view of this, Mbiti (2003, 2) saw the sounds of the guns that they heard in the early hours of the first military *coup d'état* in Nigeria (15 January 1966, that ushered in General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironisi, 1924–66, as the Head of State, after overthrowing Chief Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe, 1904–1996) as symbolising the official inauguration of Africa’s ubuntu theology as we know it today. Certainly, it was after the Ibadan Conference of 1966 that the momentum of speaking and writing about African theology, African Christian theology and Africa’s ubuntu theology gained momentum, and whose tempo has remained strong right into the 21st century.

Nevertheless, it is not and has never been a smooth sailing exercise as assaults, mainly from North America and Europe, and from a few African scholars such as Byang Kato, have remained. Expatriates working in Africa’s ecclesiastical institutions have, from time to time, ridiculed and dismissed Africa’s ubuntu theology as non-existent, as a pitfall, and as a return to paganism and witchcraft, among other descriptions. Some questions posed, such as: “What is African theology? Can there be an African theology? Are there scholars who are producing such a theology?” have been punctuated and/or spiced with scepticism or mimicry. Byang Kato, an African Evangelical theologian, went beyond this by referring to it as a theological pitfall. As noted in Gathogo (2022, 4):

In his infamous book, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (1975), [Byang Kato] dismissed John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu’s efforts for dialogue between the gospel and culture (inculturation) as nothing but a theological pitfall. In their efforts for authenticating Christianity locally, he viewed it as major theological pitfalls that posed a threat to the very existence of Christianity in Africa, as the latter was promoting pernicious syncretistic universalism. Whilst still appreciating legitimate contextualisation of the Christian message in Africa, he still felt the need for an indigenous theology that was truly biblical and truly African.

Owing to this communal-humane spirit in African indigenous discourses, such evangelical attacks were simply seen as isolationism rather than deserving cautious remarks. Certainly, the interests of the greater good of the larger community always override the interests of a few individuals, however privileged. Seen in this way, such African evangelicals were merely seen as Westernised Christians. Nonetheless, the 1960s and 1970s saw more books and articles attempting to elaborate on Africa’s ubuntu theology as in the case of the above noted cases by Sawyer (1968), Ezeanya (1967),

Idowu (1973), and Mbiti's works in general. These books and articles (especially by John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu) laid a firm ground when they first helped the readers to understand African indigenous religion, whose dialogue with the gospel brought forth Africa's ubuntu theology. In the early 1990s, the emergence of African women's theology (Oduyoye 2001), theology of reconstruction (Mugambi 1995), and the theologies of African hospitality (Gathogo 2001, 2011), among others, all rooted in the above works, have enriched it further.

In my view, Mbiti's ubuntu theology was inclusive, as in the case of the post-exilic theology of reconstruction; hence he had only used different terminologies and was not an absentee in this reconstructive phase. In his rejection of South African Black theology in the late 1970s, Mbiti was simply cautioning against theological balkanisation; and was implicitly urging theo-social inclusivity. Or was his insistence on the Africanisation of Christianity not reconstructive in its overall motif? Mbiti's ubuntu theology is certainly inclusive, humane, community-minded, and forward-looking and is certainly in continuum with post-exilic theologies of post-colonial Africa. The challenge, however, remains that an African society under pharaohs could not have afforded the luxury of indigenisation, inculturation, or even the pleasure of celebrating the joys of being Christians, as political freedom has its critical place in all of these discourses. To an extent, the coming of the New World Order and the end of cold war polarisation have provided this great opportunity for Mbiti's ubuntu theology to flourish more elaborately, just as in the case of post-exilic theologies of reconstruction.

On the whole, John Mbiti's ubuntu theology contends that the central focus on the work of God in the lives of Africans is to establish the basis for an ethical approach to life. This enables people to establish social bonds and also to resolve conflicts and build peaceful social relations. In other words, Mbiti's African communal-humane (ubuntu) theology is also anchored on the basis that African indigenous traditions must be seen to be its critical foundation. In other words, the raw material for African Christian theologies is necessarily African indigenous resources. This is evidentially so in the era of the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) where participant observation has shown that the role of African medical experts has become a critical area that is being consulted right into the 21st century. Further, as noted in Gathogo (2021a, 3):

This is clearly seen as African-Christians make concoctions that seek to treat Covid-19. Clearly, the use of ginger, a natural antioxidant, lemon and honey as *Dawa* (medicine) has gained momentum in this area ... just as in the rest of Kenya, and is seen as one which provides Covid-19 healing properties amongst other creative ways rooted in African indigenous society. Whilst ginger is found to be critical in boosting people's health as it protects against colorectal cancer, lemon is, on the other hand, seen as rich in vitamin C and critically important for detoxification. Other herbal methods of treating Covid-19 ... include steam therapy or steam inhalation to fight respiratory tract infections, use of hot steam mistily wafts from a pan, use of culinary herbs and neem trees, amongst other medicinal plants ... a tea containing traditional Malagasy plants, including Artemisia, has been used in attempting to contain Covid-19 and other related

ailments in Madagascar. Although these indigenous medicinal practices, rooted in African religiosity and spirituality, have largely failed to gain traction globally, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that “more than eighty percent of Africans rely on traditional medicine for their health care needs.”

Methodology in Mbiti’s Ubuntu Theology

Appeal to African Indigenous Resources

Mbiti’s ubuntu theology was clearly seen in his appeal to African indigenous resources, which he considered critical raw materials for the gospel. Such ancestral resources include the use of proverbs, riddles, rituals, and African idioms, among others. His use of indigenous language in his ubuntu theological discourses was elaborately seen in December 2014, when he became the first African to translate the Bible to his indigenous Kikamba language. It was entitled *Utianiyo Mweu Wa Mwiyai Yesu Kilisto* (the New Testament of the Lord Jesus Christ), launched in December 2014 by the Kenya Literature Bureau (Kenny 2015). As noted by Kenny (2015, 1), Bibles in the past:

... were mostly translated by foreigners or teams led by them into the nearly 770 African languages, mainly starting from editions in colonial European languages. Mbiti’s translation [made] one of the rare translations sourced from Greek, the original language of the New Testament.

In completing the biblical translation, Mbiti hoped that it would be used right from the primary schools in Machakos, Kitui, and Makueni counties of Kenya, which are largely dominated by Kamba speakers. In a 2016 presentation at St Paul’s University, Kenya, which the researcher was privileged to attend, Mbiti was at peace as he responded to the audience’s queries, especially with regard to explaining how he understood both Greek and Kamba (his mother tongue), as the latter language was translated from the former. He was able to explain that his African theological discourses did not abandon the indigenous resources, despite settling or relocating to Switzerland for about four decades. He could see the critical role of indigenous resources in African theological discourses, which he felt was the only way of making Christianity an authentically African religion.

Besides translating the New Testament from Greek into his indigenous Kamba language (*Utianiyo Mweu Wa Mwiyai Yesu Kilisto*) (the New Testament of the Lord Jesus Christ), Mbiti, like his wife (Verena Mbiti-Siegenthaler) who had interests in the study of languages, was a polyglot. He spoke Kikamba, Kikuyu, Kiswahili, English, and German and would read Greek and Latin languages (Mbiti 2022). As the vehicle of world cultures, Mbiti’s love for diverse languages was critical to his scholarly prowess.

Appealing to the Notion of Hospitality

Mbiti’s ubuntu theology was certainly driven by the concept of hospitality, which is an inherently African phenomenon (Gathogo 2001, 1). He espouses the notion of sharing

and other related forms of hospitality in his most commonly quoted African proverb, which says, “he/she who eats alone dies alone” (Mbiti 2002, 83; Wanjohi 1997, 21). Mbiti (2002, 83) further explains that the proverb is useful when highlighting the value of sharing in the entire drama of life; for if there is no human fellowship, there is no progress. In this regard, hospitality means more than the sharing of experiences by members of a group. Mbiti (2002, 83) aptly summarises the meaning of the ideal hospitality in Africa:

It can be made more palatable to avoid the state in which “a person who eats alone dies alone.” If we eat together, we can also happily die together—whether according to African religion, Christianity, or other religious traditions. There is in each person something exceedingly valuable, wonderful, and indestructible ...

In 2006, I tasted Mbiti’s hospitality in the scholarly world when I got his email address via a google search. After I sent him an article that I had just drafted and was awaiting publication, he responded by noting that it was inhospitable to describe or refer to Europeans as Whites and Africans as Blacks, as I had done in the article. He insisted that no human being is either White or Black; rather, a pink-chocolate colour could be thought of, though he felt that Europeans in Africa are just Euro-Africans or just Africans; while Africans in America are just African Americans or simply American people.

The article was finally published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Temple University, Philadelphia, USA, and was entitled “The Challenge and Reconstructive Impact of African Religion in South Africa Today.” It had to change drastically after Mbiti’s “scholarly hospitality” and was published two years later (Gathogo 2008). Critically important is his quick response to me though I was a “complete” stranger to him, as I was not acquainted with him then and even later. In my view, it is because of this appeal to the notion of hospitality, even in his scholarly discourses, where the sharing of views empowered Mbiti to make history by publishing “over 400 articles, reviews, and books on theology, religion, philosophy, and literature” (Oborji 2021). Moreover, he hospitably shared his personal and communal idiosyncrasies.

Reconstruction of African Literature

In five of his major books: *African Religions and Philosophy* (Mbiti 1969); *Concepts of God in Africa* (Mbiti 1970); *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (Mbiti 1971); *The Prayers of African Religion* (Mbiti 1975a); and *An Introduction to African Religion* (Mbiti 1975b), he displays the communal and humane (ubuntu) nature of African indigenous religion in all of the more than 2 000 ethnic groups that reside in Africa. He goes on to describe Africa’s indigenous societies as monotheist, ethnic nationalities whose names for the Supreme God include: Wele; Nyasaye; Nabongo; Khakaba; Isaywa among the Abaluyia (Kenya); Juok or Jok; Lubanga among the Acholi (Uganda); uThixo (God—Christian) among the Amaxhosa (South Africa); Lesa, Cuta among the Ambo (Zambia); and Molimo of Basuto (Lesotho), among others. Such

names of God, as Mbiti (1969) noted, were there from time immemorial. Hence, he discounted the works of early European anthropologists and sociologists of religion such as Edward Tylor (1832–1917), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), James Frazer (1854–1941), Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), and to an extent Max Weber (1864–1920) (Gathogo 2013a). In other words, his publications since 1969 make it clear that African religiosity is theocentric as opposed to the Christocentricism of Christianity. He also discounted Edward Tylor's view that African religious discourses were never animistic or polytheistic, for that matter. Nor did it entertain ancestral worship; rather, ancestral veneration and reverence have always been viewed as a common practice.

Family and Kinship Concerns

Mbiti's theology begins from the kinship level. In other words, he demonstrates a key concern for the family, a phenomenon where—like in the African indigenous heritage—a family is composed of the living, the unborn, and the living-dead. Further, an African family does not stop at the so-called nucleus family of father, mother and children. His ubuntu theology attempts to bring together over 2 000 ethnic groups in Africa as one monolithic entity. This also marks his major weakness in his scholarly world, as the colonial orientation brought about a completely different Africa, which is paradoxically indigenous and Westernised. Hence, a monolithic Africa is a pipedream.

Besides this, a conversation with some family members showed that he never lost his Mulago-Kitui roots, and was never a stranger to his ancestral neighbourhoods, despite settling abroad for a long time. His double citizenship (Switzerland-Europe and Kenya-Africa) further demonstrated the ubuntu spirit as he ably kept up this dual citizenship, theoretically and in practice. Through his written will, in particular, his dual citizenship (Western and African) clearly crystalised, as he had advised that he should be cremated (a Western idea) and that his cremated dust should be divided equally for burial in both Switzerland (Western) and Kenya (Africa). Hereby Mbiti was taking his ubuntu trajectory (inclusivity) across the two continents (Africa and Europe). In view of this, his concern for kinship and family highlighted this ubuntu spirit that went beyond Africa and attempted to reach the larger global community. His appointment as the director of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Ecumenical Institute in Bogis-Bossy, Switzerland, in 1974, and his marriage to a Swiss lady, where he raised his family without much ado, further confirms this broad theo-social appeal.

Other Methods

Other methods in Mbiti's ubuntu theology include: biblical translation; an ecumenical and an all-inclusive approach; as well as cultural-anthropological and philosophical enquiries. It also includes: a critical re-evaluation of Western theologies in light of the African context; the use of African proverbs, rituals, and idioms; and a perpetual appeal to the context.

In a nutshell, Mbiti's ubuntu theology has, since the 1960s, strived to reflect and express the Christian faith in African thought forms and idioms, and has always maintained a working dialogue with the rest of Christendom. Seen in this light, Mbiti's ubuntu theology has strived to relate the experiences of African Christian communities, as this makes it more purposeful in addressing cutting-edge issues facing Africa. His ubuntu theology has had a very clear task of relating the Christian message to the contemporary situation. Mbiti posed this serious challenge thus:

Christianity has made a real claim on Africa ... the question is: Has Africa made a real claim on Christianity? Christianity has Christianised Africa, but Africa has not Africanised Christianity. (Mbiti quoted in Gehman 1987, ii).

Critical Evaluation of Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology

Mbiti, however, cautioned against theological misrepresentations of African theology among scholars, and especially among expatriates, whom he referred to as "theological engineers" (Mbiti 2003, 5). "These 'engineers' pose the danger of twisting African [ubuntu] theology into something different from what and how it was intended to do in the Ibadan Conference" of 1966 or even before it (Mbiti 2003, 5). Characteristically, they advise, dictate, caution, and generally attempt to "engineer" Africa's ubuntu theology from their alien perspectives, and build the impression that local African resources will always need alien input so as to make real sense. In view of this, these "theological engineers" pose the danger of muffling and retarding the authentic development of Africa's humane theology, which ideally posits that "I can only affirm my humanity through others and/or community."

It appears that Mbiti (2003, 5–6) was at pains when he cited some scholars whom he referred to as "theological engineers" due to the way they diverted the true position of Africa's ubuntu theology. In other words, these expatriates were derogatorily called "engineers" as their views were largely misleading and misrepresenting the African context of theology. Such cases, which push Africa's ubuntu theology to the Canons of the West or still ridicule it, in Mbiti's view, include: Vincent J. Donovan (1978), who wrote what he calls "An African Creed," a phenomenon that gives the wrong impression that Africa's ubuntu theology is outside the four marks of the church or has its own creeds apart from the conventional ones. To give an impression that "Christianity is rediscovered" in Africa, rather than building on its continuity, did not please Mbiti (2003). Writing on *A Fifth Gospel*, Joseph Healey's (1981) works irked Mbiti (2003), as Africa relies on the fourth gospel and the synoptic gospel. Aylward Shorter's book, *African Christian Theology: Adaptation or Incarnation?* (Shorter 1977) equally irked Mbiti (2003) and other proponents of African indigenously rooted theology, as it implied that Africa's ubuntu theology has to be engineered towards either of the two alternatives.

Such limiting gestures contradict its inclusive-communal approaches. Richard Gehman's (1987) book, *Doing African Christian Theology: An Evangelical*

Perspective, equally provides a “theologically engineered” position toward Euro-American evangelicalism (Mbiti 2003). Clearly, Mbiti’s critical remarks regarding “theological engineers” whom he felt mislead authentic African theology, show that Africa’s ubuntu and general hospitality are dispensed in moderation and in prudence, and not recklessly, otherwise called prodigality in the Bible. It also shows that Africa’s ubuntu theology is more than a mere dictum that “a person is a person because of other persons” (*homo est propter alias personas*); for it also means avoiding, and sometimes resisting abuse, negative engineering, misrepresentation, and/or exploitation, for that matter.

Conclusion

This research article set out to explore John Mbiti’s ubuntu theology and sought to establish whether it was rooted in his African heritage, which was clearly affirmed. It was established that despite settling in Switzerland for over 40 years, he did not lose contact with his ancestral roots, where he had a modest house which he frequently visited, intermingling with members of his immediate and extended families. This accounts for his use of African proverbs, idioms, riddles, and other figures of speech in his ubuntu theology, where communal needs override individual needs. His Bible translation of the New Testament from Greek to his Akamba language in 2014 was the last major event in his last days. As was expected of a first born in his Kamba community, he took responsibility, right from his homestead to the global scene; hence his imprints will remain visible for an unforeseeable period. Earning the title of the “father of Africa’s ubuntu theology,” which lays more emphasis on community as opposed to the individual, is no mean feat. The article has noted that in his ubuntu (community-humane oriented) theological articulation, he employed an inclusive methodology that sees African theology in a three-fold approach: oral, written, and symbolic—a phenomenon that makes nearly everyone a theologian. It has also affirmed that Mbiti vouched for a symbiotic relationship between the gospel and culture in an endless drama of purpose. The article has established that Mbiti’s ubuntu theology has to be articulated prudently, and is at times critical of theological engineers who tend to hurt it from within and without. Despite settling in the affluent Switzerland, where he continued writing about Africa, he still did not lose his African roots, and neither did he allow his children to lose them. Certainly, John Mbiti was a man well rooted in the African heritage—he preached water and drank it rather than wine until he breathed his last breath.

Author Biography

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