

A CHURCH AS *KALAFONG*: ECCLESIOLOGY ACCORDING TO GABRIEL MOLEHE SETILOANE

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ABSTRACT

The interest of this article focuses on Gabriel Molehe Setiloane's views about the ecclesiological make-up in the context of African theology. This focus is relevant as it has been argued that Setiloane pushed for the importance of African theological discourse (Masoga 2012a). Some of the sensitive but also critical expressions by Setiloane include statements such as *Motho ke Modimo*, which is translated into English as "a human being is God/Divine". It has been Setiloane's theological interest to develop what he called the "African Divinity discourse", encompassing areas of life such as: ethics and morality in secular contexts; family life; civil authority; "riches and poverties"; the land question; crime; leadership styles; the functioning of the corporate sector in terms of *ubuntu*; and bio-centric ethics. This article aims to introduce Setiloane's voice on the idea of the church. For this purpose, it was decided that the two terms, "church" and "ecclesiology" would be used to drive the theoretical framework and practice perspectives, both of which will become clearer in the primary data used in this article. For Setiloane, his calling as a pastor, and the church in which he was called to, had much to do with *kalafo* (African healing) and *bongaka* (Setswana for traditional-indigenous healing system). In this case, congregants were *balwetsi* (patients) looking to the *ngaka* (traditional healer) of their *malwetsi* (diseases). I had the privilege to have been entrusted with unpublished articles by the late Setiloane before he passed away, as well as the honour of holding formal and informal interviews with him. This research article made use of the Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) approach to broach the recorded data in the form of formal interviews, informal discussions, stories, and statements.

Keywords: *Kalafong*; church; ecclesiology; African theology; African Divinity discourse; Thematic Content Analysis (TCA); Gabriel Molehe Setiloane

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INTRODUCTION

Gabriel Molehe Setiloane openly engaged with the Western theological discourse on the structure and function of Divinity (Masoga 2012a; 2012b; 2014; Setiloane 1976; 1986). For Setiloane, the agenda and space for African theological discourse were not negotiable (Masoga 2014). It has been noted that some of Setiloane's statements such as *Motho ke Modimo* (a human being is God/Divine) (Masoga 2012a; Setiloane 1976; 1986) became central and challenged the core values and structure of African theology. The statement went further to deconstruct, de-systematise and re-systematise priorities of African theology. Setiloane argued that it was critical to have a comprehensive view of Divinity in African theology that takes into account all aspects on the discourse of the living and the dead (Masoga 2012a; 2014; Setiloane 1976; 1986). Setiloane worked on this task for more than 30 years and attempted to develop a theological enterprise that focussed on:

The African Divinity discourse encompassing areas of life such as ethics and morality in secular contexts, family life, and civil authority, "riches and poverties" and the land question, crime, leadership styles, the functioning of the corporate sector in terms of *ubuntu* and bio-centric ethics. (Masoga 2014, 33)

Back in the early 1970s, Setiloane battled with the definition of Black Theology as "a term used in reference to the whole area of theological thinking by the Black Man in the world. It is negatively inspired by the fact that, in the past, it is felt, theologians have been insensitive to, and neglectful of certain experiences of mankind in our life together on this planet."¹ In a special article entitled *Black Theology: A Black Theologian from South Africa Explains What it is All About*,² Setiloane traces phases of interpretation and engagement in the USA; citing specifically that:

My own point of view is that Black Theology, as I have tried to define, did not begin in the United States. Indeed, our American brothers with TV cameras all around, mass media and communication gadgets about, and news-worthiness of their electrically charged situation, have stolen our thunder and helped to make Black Theology, even as all the cause of the Black Man, famous.³

For Setiloane, black and liberation theology, as they are currently acknowledged, were contextual phenomena that were necessitated by the contingent challenges of having to advance the dignity of oppressed African people on the basis of race and the struggle for political freedom, in the context of an oppressive political and ideological regime (Cone 1969, 1-3; Masoga 2014). According to Setiloane, such movements were necessary at the time, but the question of African Divinity transcends them (Setiloane 1986, 11). For certain, this debate on the distinction pertaining to other

1 Masoga, Informal discussions with G.M. Setiloane – Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001.

2 Local New York Newspaper, February 1960.

3 Masoga, Informal discussions with G.M Setiloane Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001.

forms and structure, content and function remain classical (Masoga and Mathye 2010). The conversation on the church and theory thereof (ecclesiology) was sparked by one of my recorded informal discussions with Setiloane in Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001 (Masoga 2001, *Personal Experiences and how my Views Developed*.⁴ These informal discussions sparked interesting debates and discussions on how Setiloane constructed the meaning of the church and how his calling developed in this regard. It is my intention to make use of these recorded informal discussions to present Setiloane's ecclesiology for the purpose of this article.

SETILOANE'S STORY OF HIS CALLING

Setiloane was born in Kroonstad on 4 February 1922. After completing his matriculation certificate, he underwent a teachers' training course at Moroka Missionary Institute in Thaba Nchu. It was during his teaching career that his calling was realised. The following is the story, as personally narrated by Setiloane:

I was called into the Holy Ministry in a very strange way. This came at the time I was preparing to go to my teachers' training college at Moroka Missionary Institute in Thaba Nchu. As was practice in every household, one had to prepare for the journey (*go itukisetsa leeto*). My mother directed me to an elderly lady in the neighbourhood, a well-known and skilled *ngaka* [an African healer]...*e ne ele Nnkadingala ruri* [a respected healer in the area]. I never questioned my mother's advice. I went and consulted. When I arrived at her healing shrine, (*kalafong*)...*o na a latlha bola* [she threw divining bones and began to divine]. I can still vividly recall the day. "*Are joo kaRre ke bonang fa fatshe? Marapo a mpontshang? Ke bona seaparo se sentsho! Ka rre tota se se buang? Se se bontshang eng?*" [Oh what am I seeing here? What are these divining bones showing me? What are they revealing? I see a black gown⁵]. I was also surprised. I had never imagined becoming myself becoming a preacher. My parents, William Mabeleng and Rebecca Masetimela Setiloane, raised us, their six children, according to the practices of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Even then, I could not think that one day I would be a minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. When I left the healing shrine, I was now more convinced that *badimo* [ancestors] and *Modimo* [God] were calling me into the Holy Ministry. I left knowing this, *Ka simolola go ikitse le gore bokamoso bo reng* [I left the shrine knowing very well who I was and what the future entailed for me]. Even when I was busy with my teacher training, I knew deep inside that I was to become a pastor.

The above conversation with Setiloane raises important issues for consideration. Firstly, Setiloane's upbringing had a cocktail of knowledge spaces, namely the family, church and community. All these collapsed into one to make one solid knowledge system that helped him to grow up and construct his identity. In this case, there was no conflict at all in his consulting *ngaka*, while, at the same time, confessing Christ as the Saviour. For the latter discussion, Setiloane replied:

4 G. M. Setiloane – Unpublished Papers.

5 Setiloane indicated to me that *seaparo*, as expressed by the *ngaka*, meant "a pastor's gown".

This is exactly what African theology attempts to do. It seeks to observe and express [teach and preach] the Christian message out of the reality of African being and experience over the ages. For this reason, it is a contextual theology. Its context is “Africanness”. It is also a “cultural” theology because it holds and thrives on the assumption that every person understands reality, and therefore Divinity, and interprets it culturally.⁶

The above statement is supported by Setiloane’s further assertions that:

As I see it, the next task of African theology is seriously to grapple with the question of Christology – who is Jesus? How does he become the supreme human manifestation of Divinity? What does “Messiah-ship” or *Christos* become in the African context? Some German theologians were scandalised when I suggested that I would like to look for the Messiah *Christos* idea in African thinking somewhere in the area of African *Bongaka*⁷ and the possession of individual persons by Divinity.⁸

Secondly, what became a huge revelation was Setiloane’s calling into the Holy Ministry. The discovery came via the divination process. It should be noted that Setiloane consulted *kalafong* to consult *ngaka*. *Bongaka* discourse is both complex and critical in that it points to a system of knowledge practice. It collapses the three time zones of past, present and future. The three are brought into one to derive meaning in this case. Setiloane was introduced to his future and was convinced about this revelation. The consultation grounded Setiloane’s African theological framing. This African theological framing took into account the importance of African Divinity. Setiloane explained his place in African theology discourse as being linked to his deep concern of the church and society, or, more appropriately, religion and society. He traces this back to education and upbringing in the fields of African Studies, viz.: social anthropology; ethnic history of Africa; what used to be called “Native Law” and “Native Administration”; and his reading of English literature and its history. This was covered in high school and during his undergraduate days, and was where the genesis of this concern is located. It lay behind his changing of direction after his completion of his BA degree, moving from an intended study of law to the preparation of ordination through the study of theology. Once questioned by his friends about this sudden change, he responded: “I was not satisfied with being an ordinary lawyer, but was called to be an ‘advocate for God’.” Interestingly, Setiloane tried to link Divinity and personality views, but could unfortunately not complete this task. However, African Divinity became central to his theological enterprise.

Setiloane argued and insisted that *Divinity-Modimo* is *Force Vitale* (Masoga 2014). Arriving on the scene at the height of the “Honest-to-God/God-is-dead”

6 Masoga, Informal discussions with G. M. Setiloane Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2002.

7 Setiloane defined *ngaka* is an African healer (doctor) often derogatively called “witchdoctor”. For a fuller treatment of this view, see his publication *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*. Balkema, A.A and Son: Rotterdam, 1976, 317, chapters 4 and 5.

8 Masoga, Informal discussions with G. M. Setiloane Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001.

debate; argued Setiloane, African theology diffused that line of thinking, which could only come out of the historical development of Western Christian theology. African theology contributes a sense of the presence, this “here-ness” of God in spite of its supremacy and “other-ness”, because the God the Africans associated with was the teaching of the missionaries and therefore had to contest numerous concepts of deities and divinities from the traditional African background (Masoga 2014). For instance, etymological and ethnographic research reveals the Basotho-Batswana concept or image of divinity as that of a “power”, a “force”, a “presence” in the universe (Smith 1923; 1962), which interpenetrates and permeates all being (Setiloane, *dima*); giving it form and life because it is inextricably part of all being, that is, participates in all being. This, therefore, renders religious experience inescapable: *Modimo-Divinity* is in all and all is in *Modimo*. Therefore, life is a totality and there cannot be any line of differentiation between the so-called “sacred” and “secular”.

This African theology comes at Christianity from a monistic world-view and claims to hear corroboration of this in the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament. In West-African religion, among the various peoples, there exists a multiplicity of smaller divinities that need to be approached and worshipped on different occasions. This is not a universal African phenomenon. Of universal application, however, are the ancestors, “who are very prominent in religious belief and practice” throughout the continent, as they are “always near and normally attentive” (Smith 1923); coupled with the idea of a Supreme or Higher Deity above all the other divinities (Masoga 2014).

As argued elsewhere (Masoga 2014), behind African beliefs and actions, explains Setiloane, lies a fundamental experience, a feeling of the existence of “something” or “somebody” beyond oneself: “a mysterious Power which cannot be seen and is not fully understood, but which is at work in the world” (McVeigh 1974, 235). Various regional names exist for this phenomenon. They all agree in terms of the fact that they describe the same experience and reality. It is these names, which, in different places, the translators employed to denote the biblical concept of “God”. Invariably, the deity the name described was placed far above and in control of the other deities who might belong to any particular people’s pantheon, hence its association with the Old Testament’s *Yahweh* (Masoga 2014).

While the names may differ as they do from group to group, the qualities or attributes of this supreme deity overlap all over the continent. Therefore, God is known as “Creator, Owner of breath and spirit, Benefactor, Merciful, Living, Lord of Glory, Silent, but active, Judge (the idea of retribution), King of the heavens” (Parrinder 1949). This deity’s origins cannot be determined, as this supreme power “interpenetrates and permeates all being; is Unknowable (an Enigma): the source of being” (Setiloane 1976, 20). The following poem by Setiloane reveals much about this theological framework:

Frontier Meditation⁹

By Molehe Gabriel Setiloane

They call me an African;
 African indeed I am;
 Rugged son of the soil of Africa,
 Black as my father and his before him;
 As my mother and sisters and brothers, living and gone from this world.
 They ask me what I believe...my faith.
 Some even think I have none
 But live like the beasts of the field.
 "Is it true," they ask "that you believe
 That the souls of your fathers hover around you,
 In and out, wherever you go?"
 Ah yes! It is true.
 They are very present with us;
 They speak to me in the wind and the rain
 Through fellow-man and living creatures,
 Birds of the air and reptiles gliding in the grass.
 The dead are not dead, they are ever near us;
 Approving or disapproving all our actions¹⁰
 They chide us when we go wrong;
 Bless us and sustain us for good deeds done,

9 Masoga, Informal discussions with G. M. Setiloane Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001. According to Setiloane (2001), "This *Meditation* is written in the characteristic style of African praise songs (*Lithoko*), which the Southern African recites before *Kgosi* on important occasions. Sometimes, a man will sing praises of himself also, telling of some strong personal experience, such as a battle in former days; while today he might be about working in the mines or he might sing about a long sojourn in a strange land."

10 During the interview with Setiloane, we touched on the subject of resurrection. It became clear that Setiloane considered this specific area of African theology as having not been adequately covered. I raised with Setiloane that the area of resurrection in African theology brings up a theological dissonance. If the idea of ancestors being alive and active in matters that face the "living" is to be considered true; then resurrection does not become an African theology problem. The fact that Christ rose from the dead could be a point of support for the active presence and participation of the "living dead" in the affairs on the "living" in this regard. The question that I raised was: How should the African church preach the risen Christ in the context of the *parussian* and eschatology theologies? Does that not constitute some confusion in this theological framework? I raised all these questions with Setiloane. Setiloane conceded that there is a need to conduct further research to address all these gaps that exist in the current make-up of African theology. Further, Setiloane mentioned that there was a need for comprehensive research to be conducted to look at the data that are recorded in archives at places such as the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and the archival institutions of the London Mission Society in England. Of major concern for Setiloane was to understand what missionaries thought they were doing to African communities. In this case, maintained Setiloane, information – such as letters from family members and friends, post cards, –reports to authorities etc. – could, potentially, shed some light on this case.

For kindness shown and strangers made to feel at home;
 They increase our store and punish our pride!
 Why do you frown, dear friend?
 Is this too much for you?
 Is your Christian conscience scandalised?
 Was it not one of your seers from the West who wrote?
 “Dust thou art, to dust returnist,”
 Was not spoken of the soul?
 What of God, the creator
 Revealed to mankind through the Jews of old,
 The YAHWEH: I AM
 Who has been and ever shall be?
 Do you acknowledge him?
 My fathers and theirs, many generations before,
 Knew him.
 They bowed their knee to him
 By many names they knew him,
 And yet this is he, the One and Only God
 They called him
 UVELINGQAKI: The first One
 Who came before anything appeared?
 UNKULUNKULU: The Big One
 So big indeed that no space could ever contain him.
 MODIMO¹¹: Because his abode is far up in the sky.
 They also knew him as MODIRI: For he has made all;
 And LESA: the spirit without which the breath of man cannot be.
 But, my fathers, from the mouths of their fathers, say
 That this God of old shone
 With a brightness so bright
 It blinded them
 Therefore he hid himself,
 UVELINGQAKI
 That none should reach his presence
 Lest they die (for pity flowed in his heart).
 Only the fathers who are dead come into his presence,
 Little gods bearing up the prayers and supplications
 Of their children to the Great Great God.
 “Tell us further you African: What of Jesus, the Christ,
 Born in Bethlehem: Son of Man and Son of God,
 Do you believe in him?”
 For ages he eluded us, this Jesus of Bethlehem, Son of Man;
 Going first to Asia and to Europe, and the Western Sphere.

11 Setiloane raised the fact that the idea of *Modimo* should not be confused. *Modimo* is not known.

Some say he tried to come to us,
 Sending his messenger of old...But...
 They were cut off by the desert and the great mountains of Ethiopia!
 Wanderers from behind those mountains have told
 Strange tales to our fathers,
 And they in turn to others.
 Tales of the man of Bethlehem
 Who went about doing good!
 The theme of his truths is now lost in the mouths of old women
 As they sussed their little children and themselves to sleep.
 Later on, he came, this Son of Man;
 Like a child delayed he came to us.
 The White man brought him.
 He was pale, and not the Sunburnt Son of the Desert.
 As a child he came
 A wee little babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.
 Ah, if only he had been like little Moses, lying
 Sun-scorched on the banks of the River of God,
 We would have recognised him.
 He eludes us still this Jesus, Son of Man.
 His Words.
 Ah, they taste so good,
 As sweet and refreshing as the sap of the palm
 Raised and nourished on the African soil.
 The truths of his words are for all men, for all time.
 And yet for us it is when he is on the cross,
 This Jesus of Nazareth, with holed hands
 And open side, like a beast at a sacrifice;
 When he is stripped naked like us
 Browned and sweating water and blood in the heat of the sun,
 Yet silent
 That we cannot resist him.
 How like us he is, this Jesus of Nazareth,
 Beaten, tortured, imprisoned, spat upon, truncheoned,
 Denied by his own and chased like a thief in the night,
 Despised and rejected like a dog that has fleas.
 For no reason.
 No reason but that he was the Son of his Father
 OR... Was there a reason?
 There was indeed...
 As in that sheep or goat we offer in sacrifice,
 Quiet and uncomplaining,
 Its blood falling to the ground to cleanse it and us;
 And making peace between us and our fathers long passed away.
 He is that LAMB!

His blood cleanses, not only us,
 Not only the clan,
 Not only the tribe,
 But all, All MANKIND:
 Black and White, Brown and Red,
 All Mankind!

Oh...Jesus, Lord, Son of Man and Son of God,
 Make peace with your blood and sweat and suffering,
 With God, UVELINGQAKI, UNKULUNKULU,
 For the sins of mankind, our fathers and us,
 That standing in the same Sonship with all mankind and you,
 Together with you, we can pray to him above:
 FATHER FORGIVE.¹²

The place of humanity and community (*motho, batho* and *botho*) is vital in Setiloane's theology. For Setiloane, African theology makes a great deal of community. A person's worth is inherent to and rooted in belonging: "I belong therefore I am" (Mbiti 1970). Being is belonging, and nothing is that does not belong. In the end, all belong to *Mong* (Sotho), *Tsoci* (Nupe), the Owner. This belonging is dynamic as each being interacts with other beings in and with the cosmos. The living strengthen their dead by offering them "service" (*inkonzo* - Nguni, *Tirelo* - Tswana); the departed, in turn, exert a real, vital influence on the living and on their destiny. The visible world is one with the invisible; there is no break in between. Therefore, at any one time, any community is more than the sum total of the physical elements that compose it. Community, therefore, is a cauldron, an interlocking circuit; in which the members, not only human, exist in interdependence on one another. Because Africans bring with them this kind of rich sense of community into the ecumenical concourse, often their expectations and demands from others with whom they associate – especially in the Christian church where much is made of *koinonia* (fellowship) as the desired goal – can be and have been rather strenuous.

It could result in – and, in fact, has done so, e.g. the indigenous church movement – disenchantment with what is presented as Christian forms. The ecumenical Christian community could deepen its own understanding immensely if it could recognise, in this African understanding, a sample of what early Christianity envisaged (as in the Book of Acts). According to Setiloane, to an outsider, the most abrasive and challenging element in African theology is its teaching on the ancestors. No African theology so far glosses over it lightly. They all defend it: even to the extent of finding some new names to explain it to foreigners, e.g. the "living dead" (Mbiti 1970).

Actually, the concept of ancestors is bound together with the African understanding of *Umntu-Motho*, i.e. its estimate of the person. The belief that each

12 The *Meditation* poem above points to Setiloane's African theological understanding. In this *Meditation* he strongly asserts he is an African. The African identity is linked to the status of the ancestors. He maintains that they are alive and not dead.

person shares in divinity is much more pronounced, and practically acknowledged, in African theology than in Western theology.

SETILOANE AS A PASTOR

As indicated earlier, Setiloane was finally accepted into the Holy Ministry in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. He served as a circuit minister to the faithful in Heilbron, Saulsport, Rustenburg, Maseru and Ventersburg between 1949 and 1953 (Masoga 2014, 34). Thereafter, in the late 2000s, Setiloane was a lecturer, but decided to leave his associate professorship position at the University of Cape Town, in the Department of Religious Studies, to re-join ministry and served the Kroonstad circuit until his retirement and ultimately his death. The Kroonstad circuit has three buildings that were built during Setiloane's ministry tenure. What is noteworthy is that the main church building's structure – where his remains were kept for his funeral in Kroonstad (Mangaung) – is like a *sangoma* lodge, in that it is built “rondavel style” and the door faces the east like a typical *sangoma* lodge (*ndomba* in Nguni). Setiloane indicated to me the following about these church buildings:

I convinced the Connexional Meeting of the Church that I should be sent Kroonstad. At that time, the Kroonstad circuit was experiencing challenges and the ministers who were serving it at that time were not successful in ministering effectively there. I then offered to help. When I arrived here, I found the church in trouble. The first thing I did was to request each member to contribute R10 towards the “cleansing” (*go tlhatsiwa*) of every member of the church. Each member had to contribute. I informed them that the ancestors were no longer with them... (*Ba ne ba furaletswe ke Badimo*). The support was overwhelming. We managed to slaughter a cow and I used *moswang* [cow dung] with water for cleansing. On the day of the cleansing ritual, the church was full to capacity. The singing was spiritually edifying: *go ne go na le mowa* [meaning that the spirit was moving]. I was wearing my black minister's gown and I sprinkled the mixture on everyone present there. I also sprinkled it on the walls and floors of the church building and even went outside to sprinkle more. Believe me, there was peace and tranquillity in the congregation. We were able to build the church building that you see today.

Baphuthegi... ke balwetsi mme moruti e ne ke ngaka... e e tshwanetseng go ba a lafa... fa moruti a sa itse go alafa phuthego e ka se fole. Lentswe la Modimo le a phekola e bile le a alafa... ke tiro ya boruti eo... go alafa le go siamisa phuthego ya Modimo. Batho ba Modimo ba tla kalafong fa ba tsena ka kgoro ya kereke. Moruti o tshwanetse go kopa matla fa go Modimo go alafa batho ba Modimo. This is translated in English as “Congregants are patients and a pastor is a healer... a healer to heal... if a pastor cannot heal the congregation then you will have a sick congregation... The Word of God divines and heals... that is the duty of ministers of the Word... to make the congregation of God well... People of God come to church for healing as they enter the churchyard... a minister of God should ask for strength from God to heal his people!”

Mophuthegong e ke thusitse ba le bantsi ka matla a Modimo le badimo...bomme ba ba neng ba sa tshole bana gompieno jaana bana le bone... ba ba neng ba tlhoka tiro ba e bone...ba ba neng ba lwala mo moweng ba a tshela...Modimo o a tshela. "In this congregation, I have helped a lot of people: for instance, those who were not able to bear children, I have helped them, and now they have children...those who were not employed, I have helped and they are now working...those that were suffering spiritually, I have managed to heal them...God is alive!"

The above statement by Setiloane makes the following two main points: (i) *Modimo* and people relate – there is a strong relationship. In this case, *Modimo* resides with the people (as a communal God) and acts in the communal sense. (ii) African Divinity (*boModimo*) is primary to the life and death experience of God's people. *Modimo* is considered central to the lives of the people (*Batho ba Modimo batshela ka ene*). Here, God is in charge of life and death situations of people. Setiloane was confronted with the fact that many African people are Christian, but maintained that they bring a much more elevated and all-encompassing understanding of divinity to Christianity, ultimately enriching it (Masoga 2012a).

SOME AFRICAN *ECCLESIAL* THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

For Setiloane, the missionaries were the first to show an interest in the religiosity of the indigenous African people and they experienced such as a hurdle in their calling to transmit their message. For Setiloane the most usefully informative materials are the records of the very early missionaries, which, in fact, laid down the foundation for the study of social anthropology. Some of these documents include: *Missionary Labours and Scenes in South Africa* (Moffatt 1842); *The Basutos* (Casalis 1861); *Ten Years North of the Orange River* (Mackenzie 1871); and *The Introduction of Christianity among the Barolong Tribes of South Africa* (Broadbent 1865).

Setiloane argues that some of the early agents of the mission were afforded the opportunity to study abroad. They must have been challenged to look at the faith while abroad. Two valuable contributions at this time come from Africans of the Church of Scotland Mission, viz. Soga's *The Ama Xhosa: Life and Custom* (Soga 1931) and Danquah's *The Akan Doctrine of God* (Danquah 1969). After these first books, Molema's *The Bantu: Past and Present* (Green 1920) and Soga's *The South Eastern Bantu* (Soga 1930) came along, and were more ethnographic; in addition, Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, although a much later work, follows the same line. The decade mid-1930s to mid-1940s is a rather barren period in terms of literature. It may well be because it was then that the IMC was making contact with Africa after the Indian Conference of 1936, held in Tambaran. Also, following the appearance of Ethiopianism on the scene, much thinking and debate was being given to the question: What will the nature of the church in Africa be? Lea's *The Separatist*

Church Movement in South Africa (Lea 1027, 1907) is an examples of this. The appearance of Bengt Sundkler's *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (Sundkler 1948) was seen as epoch-making because it was more of a sociological study than a religio-ecclesiastical one. For Setiloane, the latter publication caused harm in that it diverted attention from the development of the study of the religions of Africa, seriously examining the content of African religiosity from a theological perspective, which Smith and Willoughby had laid the foundation for. On the West Coast, however, Parrinder was devoted and prodded along on the tradition of a sympathetic Christian missionary appraisal. However, it was left to Taylor, in his *Primal Vision* (Taylor 1963) to reinstate the subject of African religiosity in the church and missionary circles. *Primal Vision* coincided with the great spiritual awakening, which spread over the African continent at the time when Senghor's *Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century* (Senghor: 1993) was beginning to penetrate and the assertion of African personality permeated all crevices of social and political life, fanning the fire of African nationalism against colonialism.

Setiloane maintains that for durability of material, Taylor's book is not comparable with Parrinder's works. Its contribution lies in its provocativeness and the fact that it is an uninhibited appreciation of indigenous African spirituality by a missionary of no mean standing in scholarship. This book, and Parrinder's works, prepared the ground for Idowu's *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Idowu 1962). By means of this work, Idowu established himself as the "father of African theology". His books: *Toward an Indigenous Church* (Idowu 1965) and *African Traditional Religion: a Definition* (Idowu 1973), err too much in the area of ecclesiastical and theological polemic, argues Setiloane. Following in the steps of Parrinder at the University of Ibadan, Idowu occupied the first Chair in the Study of African Religions in Africa. Makerere University in Uganda followed with Mbiti and his *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) and *Concepts of God in Africa* (Mbiti 1970). At about the same time in francophone Africa, Msgr. Mulago was taking Tempels's insights of *Force Vitale* further into a passionate and comprehensive interpretation of the "participation in a common life" among the Bashi people as the main, if not only, basis of all their community, life and institutions in *Un Visage Africain du Christianisme* (1965). Thus, in Idowu, Mulago and Mbiti's writings it is clear that, for the first time, African Christian scholars were doing what Smith had hoped would be done; that is, attempting to establish African traditional religion as legitimate *preparatio evangelica*. Their work was received with enthusiasm by Christian Africa, which could not help being infected with the feeling of *Negritude* and *African Personality*, and inspired by *African Nationalism*, all of which were then at their peak. Then the formation of the All Africa Conference of Churches in Kampala in 1963 provided a welcome vehicle for future development. At its inaugural assembly already, the Commission on Theological Study headed the list of five commissions. Its first activity was the Consultation of African Theologians hosted by Idowu at Ibadan

in 1966. The outcome was *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (Dickson and Ellingworth 1969).

According to Setiloane, South Africa was somewhat left behind in this dialogue between African cultural heritage and Christianity. This was mainly because the socio-political situation of white domination jettisoned all African theological efforts to be inclined to see a ray of the light of liberation in and through black theology. Nevertheless, strident voices like that of Solomon Lediga in *A Relevant Theology in Africa* (Becken 1972) as also Setiloane's on *The Selfhood of the Church*, at the AACC Assembly in Kampala in 1963, were heard here and there.

It has always been Setiloane's concern to respond to the question: "How does an indigenous traditional understanding of being persist in Christian communities in Africa today?" In answering this question, he presented his ideas at a conference in Jos. He looked at Christian history from the African perspective and pointed out three dimensions, or points of departure, from the beginning. First is the dimension of the early church when theological foundations were laid by the early church fathers and the creeds developed from that. It was, of course, all very Hellenistic, with the Roman Empire offering a base.

As Setiloane concludes on this:

It was more the Germanic in Martin Luther seeking on behalf of himself and his people a Gospel that could satisfy, which kicked against Rome and her influence. No wonder the princes gave him support. But to show how down to earth it all was even the peasants heard Martin Luther, and heard him clearer and louder than he wished to be, hence the "peasants' revolt". Indeed, when the Germans had set the ball in motion, the Nordic and the Gaelic people followed suit. There was never really all that much theological "Reformation" in England and it is significant that John Calvin belonged to the Northern part of France bordering on Germany. Also is it not striking that most of France, being ethnically Latin, rather than Germanic, is to this day much more Roman Catholic than Protestant? What I am saying is that the Reformation was a cultural revolution within the Christian Church. The dust of the Reformation settled and Christianity in Europe rolled on. Europe, especially Central Europe, became Protestant and this religious outlook became a cultural thing, a so-called civilisation.¹³

According to Setiloane, it is this cultural Western Protestantism that gave rise to the missionary movement of the eighteenth century, and the Christianity that was preached to, and assimilated. For Setiloane this was a repetition of the missionising of Central and Northern Europe where the indigenous culture of the Germanic, Gaelic and Nordic peoples was actually extirpated. As he (Setiloane) argues, almost two centuries of this type of Christianity has been passed onto the African continent. Taking this argument further, Setiloane argued that African insight and interpretation are based on "Africanness", which is a culture and orientation.

13 Masoga, Informal discussions with G. M. Setiloane Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2002.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

One is tempted to conclude using one of Setiloane's conversations that:

I believe we have now established the legitimacy of the African claim to a unique and different theological point of view within the Ecumenical Christian Community because of their cultural, geographical, spiritual, social and temperamental background. We have now contributed a little to the modern acceptance in world theological circles to the view that theology can only be, and is done only, in context. Because theology is a verbalisation of experience of Divinity at work, difference in environment means different experiences of this one and all pervasive Divinity at work, and therefore different vibrations of these experiences. It has now become accepted even by the WCC Faith and Order Commission that it is scandalously blasphemous to attempt to house all the experience of Divinity at work in the world under one theological umbrella. As we made it clear here in Accra in 1974, we have found that umbrella very leaky.

The notion of African ecclesiology still needs further research. What does it mean? What its form should be? What should constitute its basic structural principles? These questions should not suggest that no research or attempts have been made to unravel this theological conundrum. It becomes comforting to note that for Setiloane, in this research journey, African Christians continue to Africanise the Christian Western God concept and thus raise it to the level of their concept of *Modimo*, which is much higher. The narratives used in this article could become pointers to the direction of finding perspectives on African ecclesiology. *Bongaka* becomes one such possible route on this journey. Current research should strive to venture into this space. The best areas to look at are the ATR research. There is a need to review and reflect on what has been done and researched in this regard.

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