The Trinity in African Christian theology: An overview of contemporary approaches

This contribution offers a survey of the modern African theological discourse on the Trinity as a distinctive Christian doctrine of God. It is a systematic narrative review of primary literature on the doctrine of the Trinity in modern African theology with a view to identify main trends, key concepts and major proponents. It is argued that the contemporary African Trinitarian Hermeneutics cannot be understood in isolation from African debates on translatability of concepts of God framed first in terms of the reinterpretation of the theological significance of pre-Christian African concepts of God and subsequently as an outcome of African Christological reflection. The article affirms an apophatic resistance to any tendency to take God for granted as recently advanced by Ernst Conradie and Teddy Sakupapa.

Keywords: African communality; African monotheism; African traditional religion; Concepts of God in Africa; Trinity in African theology; Social doctrine of the Trinity; Supreme being.

Introduction

This contribution is a literature-based research that involved analysis of primary literature on the Trinity in African theology. Although the beginning of the historical development of the Christian doctrine of God as the Trinity may be rooted in Africa not least because of the theological contributions of early African theologians such as Tertullian, Origen, Arius, Athanasius and St. Augustine (Bediako 2004:154; Ngong 2017:55; Ogbonnaya 1994:56), this article focuses on Trinitarian hermeneutics in modern African Christian theology (hereafter African theology). It is a narrative analysis of the African discourse on the Trinity with reference to three phases in the history of African theology. These are namely the phase of initial debates on the Christian theological validity of African concepts of God, the phase of literary productivity on African Christologies and, finally, the phase of post-colonial African theology. In the context of this contribution, the phrase African theology refers to modern academic ‘theological reflection by African Christians on the interplay between Christian tradition and the African religio-cultural heritage, including contemporary experience’ (Sakupapa 2018:407).

Given debates on the racialisation of the concept of Africa, the terms Africa and African denote respectively the geographical region known as sub-Saharan Africa and peoples indigenous to this region. Such a deployment of the terms Africa and African is significant for not only for analytical purposes but also given contemporary decolonial debates on the ‘geo-politics and body politics of knowledge’ (Mignolo 2007:453). Accordingly, to foreground the locus of my enunciation, the African in this research is the black African. However, given the colonial legacy of the language divide between and amongst Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone Africa, the analysis was limited to data sources in the English language.

The ecumenical significance of the 20th century renaissance of Trinitarian theology

It is necessary to offer brief comments on the 20th century Trinitarian renaissance not least of because of the significance of two issues that emerged as central concerns in contemporary Trinitarian theology, namely the relationship between the economic and the immanent Trinity, and the practicality of the doctrine of the Trinity (Venter 2010:573). Schwöbel (1995:1–30) identifies groups of factors that led to the renewed interest in Trinitarian theology in this regard. The first of these is the ‘encounter of Western theology with the traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy in ecumenical

Note: The collection entitled ‘God as One’, sub-edited by Erna Oliver (University of South Africa) and Willem Oliver (University of South Africa).

1. For philosophical discussion on conceptualisation of Africa and African, see Mudimbe (1988).

2. For instance, the following have been published in French but not included in the overview: Ukwuije (2018); Bishwende (2008).

3. For an overview, see Chalamet and Vial (2014).
conversations’. Karl Rahner’s (1904–1984) diagnosis of marginalisation of the Trinity in western theology constitutes the second group of factors. The other factors identified by Schwöbel (1995) include the relationship between philosophical theism (and philosophical atheism) and a Trinitarian doctrine of God, and the relationships between the Trinitarian understanding of God and the understanding of human persons and human society.

Following the formative contributions of the Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) and the German Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984) to the renaissance of Trinitarian theology, many theologians have articulated various Trinitarian theologies. Amongst other concerns, theologians have engaged with the significance and implications of Rahner’s (1970:21–22) Grundaxiom, namely ‘the “economic” Trinity is the “immanent” Trinity and the “immanent” Trinity is the “economic” Trinity’. These include Jurgen Moltmann, Walter Kasper, T.F. Torrance, Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Colin Gunton, amongst others. Rahner’s (1970) axiom continues to trigger reflections on the relationship between the economic and the immanent Trinity. Some scholars are wary that Rahner (1970) eclipses the immanent Trinity, or that he identifies the immanent and the economic Trinity too closely. Still, others fear that the distinctions between the economic and immanent Trinity should not be drawn too sharply. According to LaCugna (1991:312, 342–347), one of Rahner’s key interpreters, if there is any distinction between the ‘economic trinity’ and the ‘immanent trinity’ it is conceptual, rather than ontological. LaCugna thus suggests an alternative paradigm to Rahner, namely oikonomia and theologia are inseparable. In LaCugna’s (1991:211, 348–349) view, the ‘close relationship between soteriology and doxology confirms the proper connection between oikonomia and theologia, essence and energies, which are inseparable in theology’. For Zizioulas (1991:23–24), what is needed is an apophatic theology in order not to draw sharp distinctions between ontology and epistemology. However, in Moltmann’s (1981:161) doxological understanding of Rahner’s axiom (1970), he argues that the specific starting point for distinguishing between the economic and immanent Trinity is to be found in doxology.

The other issue raised in the recent Trinitarian Renaissance concerns the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. Rahner (1970:10) succinctly placed this issue on theological agenda by highlighting the isolation of the Trinity from Christian faith and life. Amongst others, LaCugna (1991:1) attempted to illustrate that the doctrine of the Trinity is ‘ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life’. Similarly, Moltmann (1981:165) accentuates the practicality of the doctrine of Trinity with reference to its significance to overcome domination, whether ecclesiological, sexual or political, thus articulating a social doctrine of the Trinity. Others have explored the implications of Trinitarian theology for anthropology, the doctrine of creation, ecclesiology, ecumenism, ecology (David Williams), critique of sexism (David Cunningham and Elizabeth Johnson), mission, pastoral theology (Paul Fiddes), leadership, personhood (Zizioulas) and political theology (Mirolav Volf). Counter intuitively, these contributions affirm Jenson’s (1997:31) observation that the Trinity is not a ‘separate puzzle to be solved but the framework within which all theology’s puzzles are to be solved’.

The Trinity in African Christian theology

Notwithstanding the significance of the 20th century rediscovery of Trinitarian theology as described above, it was and remains a typically western and North American affair. In the growing body of literature on African Trinitarian hermeneutics, African theologians are demonstrating creativity in their various reflections on the Trinity. Given that the African discourse on the Trinity cuts across denominational and theological traditions, it may be described rightly as an ecumenical discourse. In what follows, I offer an overview of contemporary African reflections on the Trinity with specific reference to three phases in the history of modern African Christian theology.

Phase 1: The quest for the theological validity of African concepts of God

Whilst much of the early 19th century missionary and anthropological discourse denied Africans any concept(s) of God or for that matter religion, pioneer African Christian theologians such as John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu located the African belief in a Supreme Being as a point of continuity between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity. The polemical nature of this early phase of African theological discourse on God was prompted by the western missionary denigration of African religion (and culture) and denial of the existence of African concepts of God. They sought to remedy western missionary translations of God which portrayed God as foreign to Africans. I argue that this discourse by pioneer African theologians may well serve as a prolegomenon to any meaningful Christian theology of God in modern African theology (cf. Uzukwu 2009:32). It must be noted that these theologians, most notably Mbiti and Idowu, engaged with texts by western scholars such as Edwin Smith, Malcolm McVeigh and Geoffrey Parrinder which offered sympathetic accounts of concepts of God.

Phase 2: Multiple perspectives on the Trinity in African Christian theology

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Phase 3: Three phases in the history of modern African Christian theology

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Other important figures to broader Trinitarian theology include Wolfhart Pannenberg, Eberhard Jungel, Colin Gunton, Elizabeth Johnson, Ted Peters and Leonardo Boff, amongst others.

Some have charged LaCugna (1991) for reducing the Trinity to the economic plane.

For a discussion on the various models of understanding this relationship, see Lee (2009).

9. See, for instance, the edited volume by Smith, namely African Ideas of God: A Symposium (1950) that brings together surveys on beliefs about God amongst particular peoples in sub-Saharan Africa. The authors claim that the ‘tribes’ they studied had belief in the Supreme Being. Of the 12 contributors, 11 were western missionaries. See also Smith’s The Secret of the African (1929) and African Beliefs and the Christian Faith (1936); McVeigh’s God in Africa: Concepts of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity (1974) and Parrinder’s African Traditional Religion (1954).
the African belief in the Supreme Being as a point of continuity between ATR and Christianity (hereinafter continuity thesis). This continuity thesis found expression in many of Mbiti’s writings. In his Concepts of God in Africa, Mbiti (2013:91) argued that the notion of God as creator was ‘the commonest attribute of the works or activities of God’ amongst African peoples whose concepts and names of God were compiled by him. Idowu shared Mbiti’s claim for the theological significance of African names for God and of a monotheistic continuity between Christianity and ATR. However, Mbiti’s claim of the implausibility of atheism in traditional Africa encapsulated in his famous phrase, namely that ‘Africans are notoriously religious’ has been interrogated. A notable critic in this regard is Eloi Messi-Metogo (1997:33–45) who, contra-Mbiti, documents accounts of African indiffERENCE to the Supreme Being.

Although affirmed by several African theologians who nevertheless expressed differing views on the degree of continuity (cf. Dickson 1979; Kibicho 1978; Setioloane 1979), the continuity thesis attracted two related but different critiques. The first came from African evangelicals (e.g. Byang Kato) who stressed discontinuity in God’s identity on the basis of alleged doctrinal orthodoxy. The second emerged from the ranks African intellectuals (e.g. Okot p’Bitek) who critiqued African Christian theological reinterpretation of African concepts of God for the sake of decolonisation (see Conradie & Sakupapa 2018:43–47).

Nevertheless, a salient implication of the continuity thesis was that Africans had known God long before the arrival of missionaries. Little wonder that the late Gambian scholar Lamin Sanneh attributed the successful implantation of Christianity in Africa to the facilitating role of ATR, most notably with respect to the missionary appropriation of African names of God in vernacular translations of the Bible. In his view, Christian expansion in Africa was ‘virtually unlimited to those societies whose people had preserved the indigenous name for God’ (Sanneh 2003:18). In his defence of Mbiti’s continuity thesis, Bediako (2000) affirmed Sanneh’s logic (2003) of translatability. According to Bediako (2000:16), ‘the God whose name had been hallowed in [African] indigenous languages in the pre-Christian tradition was found to be the God of the Bible, in a way that neither Zeus, nor Jupiter, nor Odin could be’ (cf. Walls 2002:121). By thus arguing, Bediako (2000) affirmed Mbiti’s explanation of the relationship between ATR and Christian that ATR served a preparatory role (praeparatioevangelica) for the Gospel. For Mbiti (1979:68), what the Gospel brought to Africa was Jesus Christ. Hence, Mbiti (1971:190) spoke of Jesus Christ as the ‘final test for the validity and usefulness of any theological contribution’ and that theology ‘falls or stands on how it understands, translates and interprets Jesus Christ at a given time, place and human situation’. These early reflections laid the ground for the significance which Christology had in the subsequent history of African theology (see Mugambi & Magesa 1998). Nyamiti’s (1989:17) remark that Christology is ‘the most developed subject in today’s African theology’ illuminates this observation.

Phase 2: Trinitarian implications of Christology

Following the creative reconstruction of the idea of God in ATR as discussed above, African theologians were faced with the task to clarify who Jesus Christ was to the African. This was in part necessitated by a pastoral concern, namely how to make the African Christian at home in new faith. Given the extant literature on African Christology, I limit my analysis to the Trinitarian implications of the main trajectories of African Christological. African Christologies have tended to develop along the lines of the variants of African theologies, namely inculturation, liberation and reconstruction. Inculturation theologians ascribed various honorific titles to Jesus, including ancestor, elder brother (Kabesélé), great chief (Pobe), guest (udolo), healer (Apiah-Kabi; Kolié), master of initiation (Sanon), Servant-King (Ukachukuw Manus) and revealer (Ezigbo). In African Christologies of liberation, the image of Christ as the liberator was foregrounded. This found expression within the three strands of African liberation theology, namely, liberation theology in Africa, south of the Limpopo river (see Ela 1986:87; Magesa 1989:151–163), African women’s theology (Oduyoye 2002:98) and South African black theology (see Mofokeng 1987:42). Most recently, another approach to Christology has emerged, namely reconstructive Christology.
(see Mugambi 1995:90). Although Mugambi (1995:13) has not elaborated on reconstructive Christology, he intimates that the mission of Jesus of Nazareth was reconstructive. A more developed reconstructive Christology is articulated by the Congolese Lutheran theologian, Kà Mana (2004), who creatively integrates the motifs of identity and liberation. Kà Mana’s Christology of abundant life foregrounds Christology as the heart of the reconstruction of African societies. Christ is the catalyst of reconstruction.

There are nevertheless a number of limitations to African Christologies, particularly those that employ what Nyamiti (1994:70) calls ‘the comparative analogical method’. The first challenge relates to the necessary starting point of most African Christologies, namely from below. African Christologies have tended to pay less attention to the divine ontology of Christ, and thus overlook the relationship between his divinity and humanity. This challenge is most pronounced in Christologies which employ the analogy of ancestor to illumine the mediatory role of Christ between God and humanity. These Christologies fail to capture the divinity of Christ, given the problematic associated with the theological interpretation of the identity of ancestors (see Stinton 2004:138, 156). An exceptional but not fully developed ancestral Christology that seeks to preserve the divinity of Christ is Bediaako’s (2000:25) ancestral incarnational Christology which aims to do so by emphasizing the incarnation. The need for adequate African accounts of Jesus Christ as ‘fully divine’ has been variously intimated (see Nyamiti 1994:71; Pobee 1979:85–98). Another limitation of ancestral Christologies relate to the changing socio-cultural contexts in Africa in the face of modernisation and urbanisation. This concern illustrates the fate of some Christologies articulated by professional theologians which are limited in their practical and pastoral significance for churches and Christian discipleship and mission. This concern has found expression in some recent contributions which call for methodological reorientation that takes seriously grassroots perspective (see Stinton 2004:270–278).

Further, given the charismatisation or pentecostalisation of mainline Christianity in Africa, African theologians also need to account for Christologies of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa. 20

Liberation Christologies may also be charged with reductionism for apparently absolutising a particular dimension of oppression. For Nyamiti (1996:73), what is needed is integral liberation.

Notwithstanding the enduring issues in African Christology, African theologians have generally affirmed the creedal belief regarding the divinity and humanity of Christ. Nevertheless, several Africa Christological images and symbols are limited in giving expression to divine identity of Christ. If so, this begs further elaboration of how the Master of Initiation, the Ancestor par excellent is the same as the God confessed as Truine.

**Phase 3: A biblical understanding of who Christ is in himself ‘plunges us into the theology of the Trinity’ (Nyamiti)**

From the foregoing analyses of the African discourses on the continuity of God and on Christology, it is evident that the focus on continuity of God has not led to thoroughgoing Trinitarian reflections. As the Kenyan theologian Kombo (2007:15) contends, African Christians must view God not just within the confines of African concepts of God but must explore how ‘the incarnation and Pentecost radically modify their prior’ concepts of God (cf. Vahakangas 2002:70). In what follows, I discuss African Trinitarian hermeneutics with reference to three broad approaches, which are identified in the following manner. In the first approach, Trinitarian hermeneutics may be seen as a logical outcome ancestral Christologies. The second are the approaches which draw on African notions of relationality and communality. The third approach entails the retrieval of concepts from traditional African ontology to reinterpret the doctrine of Trinity.

**The symbol of the Trinity and ancestral analogy**

There are several attempts in Trinitarian hermeneutics to predicate on the ancestor analogy (see Bediaako 2000:25–31; Nyamiti 1996; Oladipo 1996). The Tanzanian Roman Catholic priest Nyamiti (1989) developed a doctrine of the Trinity as an extension of his ancestor Christology. Nyamiti (1989:31) was convinced that ‘all truly profound theology must’ be ‘ultimately rooted in the Trinity’. Nyamiti (1984:19–20) opines that through Christ, God has become our ancestor. The ‘Father is the Ancestor of the Son, the Son is the Descendant of the Father’ and the Holy Spirit is the mutual Oblation between the two (Nyamiti1996:55–56).21 The Father is ancestor and Christ is the ‘brother-ancestor’. In this vein, Christ’s ancestorship to humanity is rooted in the Trinity. Just as there is kinship in African ancestral relation, Nyamiti (1996:46) analogously spoke of ancestral kinship amongst the persons of Trinity.

The Nigerian theologian Oladipo (1996) similarly employs [Yoruba] ‘ancestrolgy’ to propose an African conception of the Trinity. According to Oladipo (1996:114–115), ‘as God “the Great ancestor” is present and active through Christ “the Proto-Ancestor”, “the Proto-ancestor” continues to be present and active through the Holy Spirit – the Grand-Ancestor’. Further to the limitations of ancestor analogy noted in my discussion of Christology above, the use of ancestor analogy in Trinitarian hermeneutics has the danger of undermining a fully Trinitarian notion of God, given the challenge of surbodianism.

19 See, for instance, Clifton Clarke’s African Christology: Jesus in Post-Missionary African Christianity (2011), and Victor Engba’s Re-Imagining African Christologies: Converging with the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus in Contemporary African Christianity (2010).

20 See, for instance, Cephas Omenyo’s brief discussion on the doctrine of charismatic renewal groups in his Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism (2006).

21 Nyamiti’s pneumatology appears close to Augustine’s mutual love theory.
Trinitarian communion as model for church and society: Relational approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity

An approach that has found wider expression amongst African theologians is the appeal to the social analogy of the Trinity. It is often on the basis of communal orientation of most African contexts. The late Tanzanian Roman Catholic bishop Mwoleka (1975:204) opined that the Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved but rather an example to be followed. According to Mwoleka (1975), the ‘three Divine Persons share everything in such a way that they are not three gods but only One’. And just as the three are one, Christ’s wish is: ‘That they (his followers) may be one as we are one’. Accordingly, he opined that the African philosophy of socialism, namely *Ujamaa*, reflects the Trinity, as our understanding of the Trinity is inseparable to the sharing of life together.

Amongst African women theologians, Oduyoye (2000:141–145) has argued that the Trinity may be understood as offering an egalitarian model of female–male relations. Without suggesting that the Trinity is indispensable, Oduyoye (2000) interprets the symbol of the Trinity as a model for society. Our baptism into the name of the Trinity, Oduyoye (2000:143) writes, ‘means that we should stand not for monarchies and hierarchies but rather participation’. Other African women theologians critique the male language of the Trinity and argue that it not only reflects the patriarchal context in which it arose but also legitimises a male view of God, thus sustaining patriarchal relations.

The Nigerian theologian Orobator (2008) adds to this debate on the naming of God by drawing on a Yoruba maternal imagery namely *Obirinmeta*, to illumine God’s pragmatic involvement in the daily existential needs of humanity. According to Orobator (2008:31), the symbol of *Obirinmeta* expresses the idea of ‘a woman who combines the strength, character, personality, and beauty of three women … She is a multifunctional woman of unmatched density and unbounded substance’. *Obirin meta*, Orobator (2008:32) argues, ‘symbolises the abundant and radical open-endedness of God in God’s self and in our encounters of God’. Although one may argue that Orobator’s (2008) use of *Obirinmeta* may be interpreted as a hermeneutics of appreciation, I wonder whether a hermeneutics of suspicion may not be best employed against his project. It appears that by appropriation of this female symbol, Orobator (2008) is unwittingly affirming the status quo of women’s oppression in Africa.

Another reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity that draws on the African traditional understanding of community was articulated by the Nigerian Methodist theologian Ogbonnaya (1994). Unlike Oduyoye (2000) and Mwoleka (1975), Ogbonnaya (1994:60) brings an African communal worldview to bear upon the Trinitarian thought of the early North African theologian Tertullian, who interpreted the Trinity as a theory of divine community. Dissatisfied with the monotheistic accounts of God by notable African theologians such as Idowu and Mboti on the one hand and polytheistic descriptions of the divine opined by Godfrey Leinhardt, amongst others, Ogbonnaya (1994:14–27) observes that although Africans have concepts of the *One* and the *Many*, the African understanding of God is neither monotheistic nor polytheistic. Instead, he proposed the concept of ‘Divine communalism’ as the most appropriate category for explaining the Divine in African context. Communality, Ogbonnaya (1994:89) argues, ‘is the essence of the gods in African worldviews’. He (1994:23) infers that the Divine ‘is a community of gods who are fundamentally related to one another and ontologically equal whilst at the same time distinct from one another by their personhood and functions’. By foregrounding the African perspective of the communality of the Divine as a community of equality, he suggests a correlation between African communality and relationality in the Trinity. However, as Conradie and Sakupapa (2018:46) argued, Ogbonnaya’s construal of ‘the African community of gods as identical with Trinitarian communion’ is unclear. Further, he appears to read sub-Saharan traditional notions of communality into Tertullian’s North African world most evident in his claim that the connection Tertullian makes between *unitas* and *substancia* is closer to the Bantu notion of Vital Force. Ogbonnaya’s (1994:33, 37) attempt to speak on traditional African religions and communal orientation in ancient Egypt was equally problematic. This was partly illustrated in his use of the category of identity ‘African Egyptian’.

As important as the Africanity of Tertullian may be, it is also the case that in his articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, Tertullian appropriated much from Greco-Roman thought. Nevertheless, although Ogbonnaya (1994) does not develop the theme of practical significance of the Trinity, he intimates on a vision for human society modelled on the Divine community.

The monograph by Nigerian Lutheran theologian Bitrus (2018) is the most recent African attempt to unravel the implications of Trinitarian theology for Christian life, ecclesiology, socio-political life, socio-economic systems, relations between women and men and the environment. The significance of Bitrus’s (2018) Trinitarian hermeneutics lies in his reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity as a critique to patriarchal domination inherent in African

God as the Great Muntu: The Trinity and African metaphysics of Ntu

Another approach to the Trinity in contemporary African theology entails the retrieval of African concepts to express the Trinity. Kombo’s (2007) work is instructive in this regard. Kombo’s point of departure is that pioneer African theologians had not sufficiently pondered the discontinuities between Christian and pre-Christian African understandings of God. Kombo (2007:208) wonders how God as Modimo, Nyame, Leza and Nyusaqe is the Triune God? For Kombo (2007:232), what is needed is Christianisation of the African notion of God. To do so, he suggested employing an African intellectual infrastructure to explain the Christianised concept just as the early church Father did when they utilised the infrastructure of Greek philosophy. Therefore, drawing on an African ethno-philosophy6 dubbed the metaphysics of Ntu, Kombo (2007) recasts the doctrine of the Trinity in other than Greek categories. Accordingly, Kombo (2007:243) names God as the Great Muntu, the Supreme Vital Force. The Great Muntu, Kombo (2007) argues, ‘has oneness of Ntu and activity with the Son and the Holy Spirit’:

The ‘genuine Muntu’ that the Son has, is the ‘Great Muntu’ himself. Thus, the Son is a perfect reflection of the ‘Great Muntu’, the Holy Spirit is a perfect reflection of the ‘Great Muntu’, and the Father is a perfect reflection of the ‘Great Muntu’. (p. 245)

The originality of Kombo’s (2007) work, notwithstanding his reinterpretation of the Trinity, seems to be a reinstatement of the western cultural articulation of the Trinity ‘forced’ to fit into terminology derived from the traditional African context. His formulations at times read like an ‘African equivalent of Western dogmatic formulations’ (Bediako 2004:159). Further, Kombo’s (2007:236–247) description of Trinitarian fatherhood corresponds to a patriarchal model of the Trinity that depicts the Father as a source of divine community, thus tending towards subordinationism. Nevertheless, Kombo’s (2007) originality in employing an African metaphysics is commendable, given its contribution to the debate on the problem of the language of person in Trinitarian theology. This is crucial to demonstrate that although some African theologians such as Mugambi (1995) have argued that the notion of ‘person’ in the Trinity is misleading (to an African) and must be discarded, the problem of the language of person is not a typically African problem.7 The history of dogma illustrates that the development of the classic doctrine of the Trinity was a creative process that included not only linguistic borrowings but also that the language and grammar of Trinitarian theology has been developed in the context of debate. Therefore, there is no reason why African theologians cannot introduce new terms if these are consistent with scripture. As Kombo (2016:46) argues: ‘The actual nexus for any meaningful discourse on the doctrine of the Trinity ... is when we state in our own terms what we believe the Bible teaches’.

Conclusion

This contribution situated the modern African theological debate on the identity of God in the encounter of African Christians with the western translation of God through various missionary theologies. It highlighted three main approaches to Trinitarian hermeneutics in the African context. One may conclude that most African perspectives to the Trinity adopted the social analogy of the Trinity to draw implications of the doctrine for Christian life and society. The attempt to place the symbol of the Triune God in the public sphere (often on the basis of African communality and relationality) illustrates the importance of the social context in African theological method. However, the approach has its own limitations as discussed above. As Conradie and Sakupapa (2018) argue, one of the challenges is that the:

[Social implications derived from such an emphasis on communion are read into an understanding of communion without due cognisance of hierarchical relationships in terms of gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation and being able-bodied. (p. 50)]

Nevertheless, there is no given Trinitarian symbolism that could fully capture the mystery of God. At best, ‘the confession of God as Triune serves as the doxological conclusion of the liturgy’ (Conradie & Sakupapa 2018:53).

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Author’s contributions

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Ethical considerations

The author confirms that ethical clearance was not required for the study.

6His interlocutors for the metaphysics of Ntu include Placide Tembemp, Alexis Kagame and Mulagowa Cikala to the notion of vital force. For a discussion of vital force as an African notion being, see Sakupapa (2012).

7For instance, unsatisfied with the modern sense of the concept ‘person’, namely ‘a self-conscious will and activity center’, to describe the traditional Trinitarian formula, Barth and Rahner (1974:103–115) suggested the notions of ‘modes of being’ (Seinsweisen) and ‘distinct modes of subsisting’ respectively. Some however argue that Barth and Rahner’s positions in this regard represent a ‘neo-modal Trinity model’. For Kasper (2012), what is needed is a concept of person that stresses relationality. Amongst others, Zizioulas’ (1991b) thesis on the ontology of person is instructive.