

**Gabriel Molehe Setiloane:
His intellectual legacy**

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Abstract

Gabriel Molehe Setiloane remains a pillar in terms of challenging and engaging with the Western theological discourse on the structure and function of divinity. Most of his dialogues in his publications pushed for the importance of African theological discourse. Some of the sensitive, but also critical expressions Setiloane made, include statements such as, *Motho ke Modimo* (a human being is God/divine). The author has been fortunate to engage with Setiloane on ideas of African theology as a contribution to the current African religion scholarship. According to Setiloane, there is a need to have a comprehensive understanding of divinity in African theology that encompasses all – all the *living* and the *dead*. This article aims to discuss some theological briefs and developments of his ideas on African theology in celebrating his outstanding intellectual legacy. Setiloane's voice has been side-lined by the past and current (South) African theological systems and structures.

A short biographical and intellectual sketch of Gabriel Molehe Setiloane

Gabriel Molehe Setiloane was born on 4 February 1922, the third of six children of the late Papa William Mabeleng and Mama Rebecca Masetimela Setiloane of Kroonstad. He attended school at Kroonstad and matriculated in 1941. He then obtained a teacher's certificate of education at Moroka Missionary Institute in Thaba 'Nchu in 1942. Thereafter, he taught at various mission schools in the towns of Heilbron, Saulsport, Rustenburg, Maseru, Ficksburg, and Ventersburg, as well as at the then Bantu High School in Kroonstad (1946-1948). The indomitable spirit of the motivated achiever manifested itself early in his life, when, while he was teaching, he studied privately and, in 1947, received a Bachelor of Arts from the University of South Africa. Gabriel Molehe Setiloane subsequently received a Diploma in Theology from Rhodes University (1953); the Bachelor of Divinity from the Union Theological Seminary, New York, USA in 1955; and the PhD from

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Bristol University, UK in 1973. Setiloane has worked in three career contexts, namely ministerial duties within the church, ecumenical responsibilities and professorial/scholarly productivity. In the church, he served as a circuit minister to the faithful in Heilbron, Saulsport, Rustenburg, Maseru, Ficksburg, and Ventersburg between 1949 and 1953.

As part of his ecumenical responsibilities, he served as the Secretary of the Youth Department of the Methodist Church of South Africa in Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Mozambique and South West Africa (Namibia) from 1957 to 1962. He went on to serve in the Mindolo Ecumenical Centre, Kitwe, Zambia, as the Executive Organising Secretary of the Youth Commission of the All African Conference of Churches from 1962 to 1968. From 1973 to 1975, Reverend Setiloane was appointed the Executive Secretary of the Schweizerische S udafrika Mission with a seat in Zurich.

In addition, Gabriel Molehe Setiloane's illustrious life included working as a researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1963. He was invited as visiting lecturer to Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, UK, and the reputed cluster of international centres for the training of missionaries. He lectured and ministered there from 1968 to 1969. Remaining true to the pattern of the motivated achiever and committed pastor, he enrolled for his PhD studies at Bristol University in England. During this time, he joined the staff of the Student Christian Movement of Great Britain and Ireland and served as chaplain to African students in Britain. He earned his PhD from Bristol University in 1973. In 1975, he accepted an invitation to Botswana to serve as the founding father of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Botswana and Swaziland. He served in this capacity from 1975 to 1978. He remained true to his vocation to the ministry throughout his life. He returned to the Free State to serve as the Superintendent Minister at Kroonstad from 1980 to 1984. In 1984, Setiloane served as Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, until his retirement in 1990. Upon retirement, he served as Visiting Professor at Rutgers University in 1991 and New York Seminaries, USA in 1993. He founded the Luthuli College for Vocational Training for High School Drop-outs and served as a member of the South African Broadcasting Corporation for one term. He received many honorary doctorates from the following reputed institutions of higher learning: University of Fort Hare, University of Botswana, University of Durban-Westville, University of Nairobi, Kenya and University of London, England.

His distinguished educational pursuits started at a primary school in Mafikeng, in the North West Province. Setiloane's place in African theology discourse linked to his deep concern in the area of Church and Society or, more appropriately, religion and society. He traced this back to his education and upbringing in the fields of African Studies, including social anthropology, ethnic history of Africa, and what then used to be called native law, and

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native administration studies. His studies were, in addition, coupled with his reading of English literature and its history during both his high school and university undergraduate training days. During his undergraduate training, he changed from studying for a law degree to focus on a Bachelor of Arts degree to pave his way for ordination. During one of the interviews the author conducted with Setiloane, he mentioned that "... once questioned by his friends about this sudden change, he responded that "I was not satisfied with being an ordinary Lawyer, but was called to be an 'Advocate for God'".

Setiloane was an avid reader and outstanding researcher who read and analysed works that included William Temple's *Christianity and Social Order*. The latter was prescribed as reading for a term paper while he was in theological training at Fort Hare in 1952, and brought to the surface in him "what had before then been more institution and a vague, undefined feeling".¹ This publication (*Christianity and Social Order*) confirmed the "dissatisfaction that had been left in his mind and his soul by the study of the 'Native Policies'² of the various colonial powers ruling over portions of the African continent. Thus, it should be understood that much of Setiloane's speaking, preaching, writing and even understanding of the Bible have been under this influence. Of the four gospels, the gospel of Luke, with its concern for inclusivity, Non-Jew and less privileged, and its emphasis on Christianity as a "way of life" (Chapter 7:1ff) spoke more to his need. This then became the basis of his hermeneutical preference and approach to theology and biblical interpretation.

At the Union Theological Seminary, New York, where he studied for one year, he was attracted more to John C Bennett with his Church and Society Course on *The application of Christian social ethics* and Bill Webber's *Church and community seminar* than to Reinhold Niebuhr, or Paul Tillich, both of whom he claims he battled to understand.

While at the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute, Chateau de Bossey, Celigny, in the *Graduate Course*, he was most fascinated by the story of the Confessing Church in Germany during the Nazi Regime, obtained at first hand from his fellow students and some professors. He then read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship*, which had been presented by a Canadian friend at an Ecumenical Work Camp in the US, with great care and application.

When he returned home to South Africa, his first public utterance other than as circuit minister of the New Goldfields Circuit in the then OFS (Orange Free State) was in October 1956, at a Conference of the Inter-denominational African Ministers' Association of South Africa (IDAMASA). As Setiloane recalls, the agenda of the ten-day conference was to consider all

¹ Setiloane-Masoga interviews 2002 – Kroonstad.

² Setiloane-Masoga interviews 2002 – Kroonstad.

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the aspects (legal, political, social, religious, etc) and the implications of the report of the Government Commission on *Territorial Apartheid*, commonly called the *Tomlinson Report of 1956 for the African Community*. Canon A Zulu had read a paper on the *Church's view* of the measures and the policies advocated by the report. Setiloane was called upon to present a response to Canon Zulu's presentation and he (Setiloane) could not resist drawing a parallel between the South African situation and that of Germany during the Third Reich. The comment was reported in *The World*, a Johannesburg, bi-weekly of wide circulation and *The Drum*, also of Johannesburg, a magazine for African Readership (see the October, 1956 numbers). Much of Setiloane's comment focused on the active participation of the church in the context of injustice and oppression. As he (Setiloane) expressed, "The Church should not stand by and behold justice, equity and decency flouted and human dignity abrogated" and he quoted Bonhoeffer: "I cannot stand by and allow a reckless driver on a public highway threatening the safety of innocent people". As the General Secretary of the Methodist Youth Department, he had the opportunity to sit on the Conference of the Methodist Church of South Africa for six years.

From 1957 to 1962, the African section of the Methodist Church of South Africa, where Setiloane served as its General Secretary in the Youth Department, strove to persuade the Church to speak against the discrimination and racial prejudices of the society in which it found itself. Quite understandably, Setiloane became deeply involved in carrying out the decisions of an African caucus which pressed for the appointment of an African President following the 1958 Conference, as an earnest demonstration of his commitment to the "one and multi-racial Church". Setiloane recalls having been charged to convince Rev. Seth M Mokitimi of their selection about him being their candidate. This is how he narrated this: "I battled in argument with Seth Mokitimi in his Mission House home at Osborn Mission in the former Transkei until the early hours of the morning. Great has been my agony, afterwards, to see what Seth Mokitimi had to suffer as a result of my persuasion that day."³

For, this step brought to the surface, what Setiloane calls, all the racist prejudice of the white side of the Church. As he mentioned: "Many of us were called names: 'Communists', 'Fellow Travelers', 'Rabble-rousers', etc., and our call to the

³ Setiloane-Masoga interviews – Kroonstad, 2002.

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Christian ministry, was interpreted as opportunism and a means to further our political ambitions.”⁴

It was not until 1964, after a struggle lasting six years, that the Methodist Church of South Africa appointed Seth Mokitimi as its first Black President.⁵

The basis of Setiloane’s theological make-up

Gabriel Molehe Setiloane engaged in and challenged the Western theological discourse on the structure and function of divinity. Most of his dialogues in his publications pushed for the importance of African theological discourse. Some of the sensitive, but also critical expressions made by Setiloane include statements such as *Motho ke Modimo* (a human being is God/divine). It strikes one what a powerful effect Setiloane’s assertion on African divinity by Setiloane, had, as it continues to challenge the current African religion scholarship. According to Setiloane, there is a need to have a comprehensive understanding of divinity in African theology that encompasses all – all the *living* and the *dead*. In this regard, Setiloane attempted to develop what he called 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 biocentric ethics. For more than thirty years, Setiloane continued to conduct critical dialogues with the then proponents of Black Theology and Liberation Theology – holding the firm view that African Divinity derived from African culture, and that Black and Liberation Theology developed from a narrow form of Western Christianity. His main points were that: (i) for African people, African Divinity is primary to their life and death experience; and (ii) if one has to confront the fact that many African people are Christians, then they bring a much more elevated and encompassing understanding of divinity to Christianity, ultimately enriching it.

GC Oosthuizen (1976) once emphasised that the distinction between *Africanisation* and Black Theology is a superficial one, as both are part of a process. In this process a black person, argued Oosthuizen, wishes to emphasise his or her identity as a person and a human being created in the image of God, whom he or she wishes to approach in his or her own sensitive manner.

⁴ Setiloane-Masoga interviews – Kroonstad, 2002.

⁵ By then Setiloane had already left the Youth Department and was resident in Zambia seconded by his Church to the All Africa Conference of Churches as its Secretary of the Commission on Youth. But, before leaving South Africa he had successfully proposed a motion at the Annual Conference of 1961 in Johannesburg, to the effect that the Methodist Church desist making statements on “Social and Political Questions,” piously declaiming the evils of Government policy when it was itself, in fact, practicing similar policies.

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For certain, this debate on the distinction as pertaining amongst others to forms and structure, content and function, remains classic. Gabriel Molehe Setiloane has always been in this contest – arguing fiercely about the place and function of African theology. In fact, as early as the seventies he wrestled with this tension – whether creatively or not. It should be stressed that Setiloane had been part of the black *theologisation* process until he began to do serious research and reflected on what he called a distinct feature of African theology. Back in the early seventies Setiloane (1971) 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”.⁶

It has always been Setiloane’s aim, since the inception of the first Religious Studies Department at the University of Botswana in the late 1960s, to develop African religion and culture in terms of the contemporary challenges of his time. Setiloane’s ambition was to academically develop, from within African religious consciousness, its spirituality and morality into the public sphere, into governance, and into corporate South African systems and institutions. On the one hand, the fact that African religion and culture function in these spheres is a *sine qua non* for all Africans. According to Setiloane every African person carries this spirituality and morality⁷ into his or her workplace every day of his or her life. It is present in their activities, their labour, their communication and interaction with fellow people – whether kin, customers, or strangers.⁸ On the other hand, as he strongly argued, this is neither recognised nor appreciated by those who are not from African descent. This, together with some other contradictions – dating from the colonial and apartheid periods – muddy the waters from the various sides in virtually every encounter we as South Africans engage in daily, be that in the office, in conferences, across negotiation tables or even in the kitchens and gardens of our country. Setiloane’s primary aim was to develop African sensibility so that it may confront the modernising of today, and the corporate and globalising world. On the one hand, he saw that this had to be done so that Africans could engage with and compete within the complexities of this world from within their own religious and cultural assumptions. This project of developing African religion and culture in terms of the contemporary challenges of his time had been his life-long ambition – but was, unfortunately, thwarted on many occasions, also at the University of Cape Town, where he accepted a position as Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies.

⁶ Informal discussions with GM Setiloane – Kroonstad, Mangaung, 2001.

⁷ Here *Motho ke Modimo* concept was developed.

⁸ Meaning that a human being is intrinsically religious.

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For Setiloane, African people function – even as they have had to do this in the most detrimental of circumstances – as whole human beings, where the spiritual and real are not separated from one another, but intricately and inextricably intertwined.

Setiloane's views on African theology

Setiloane emphasised that “Native intuition, confirmed by my African Studies, has convinced me that there is an inadequate understanding of the forces and principles, mainly religious, but often dismissed as superstition by early missionaries, anthropologists and the Church, that lie behind African ideas about Man, Society and Divinity” (see the Kampala Address).⁹

In this regard, Setiloane argued that:

African Traditional Society as I see it (and I draw mainly from my people, the Southern Bantu, in particular, the Sotho-Tswana), had a deeper and more adequate sensitivity and perception of the divine at work in human relationships, society and nature at large.¹⁰

His ideas and, ultimately, the development of African theology discourse, developed from his contact with the World Church through the WCC (World Council of Churches) and its conferences and assemblies, discussions and consultations on all manner of subjects and issues.¹¹

The impression he had was that Western Christianity has lost the *sensitivity* in matters of religion, “of the African traditional scene”.¹² This sensitivity of humanity to divinity at work in all corners of society and its relationships – the preferred term by Setiloane is the *totality of Life*. For Setiloane this lies at the heart of African attitudes to religion.¹³ This *native*

⁹ Setiloane unpublished papers.

¹⁰ Cf. EW Smith: *The Religion of the Lower Races*, Macmillan Co., New York, 1923, p 3.

¹¹ Some included the New Delhi, 1961, Salonica, 1959, Geneva, 1966, Mindolo, 1964 on Racism and Uppsala, 1968), together with study abroad and visits, in the US, Europe and now Great Britain.

¹² Setiloane-Masoga interviews, Kroonstad, 2002.

¹³ Interestingly enough Setiloane regarded the latter to be basic to the *Kerugma*. Its loss to Western Christianity Setiloane ascribed to Greek and Roman philosophical influences on Christian thought development over the centuries. As he argues, these influences are already seen at work in the Biblical material, e.g. how much was Paul influenced by the *Stoa* or how much of Gnosticism is detectable in the Johannine Writings etc. Setiloane points out over the ages as a result of this influence; Christianity and Christian theology have emphasised *Concept*, the cerebral acceptance more than the pragmatic application. Christianity has thus been passed down as a body of concepts (e.g. The Creeds) to be given consensus to, rather than as a *way of life*, a dynamic force to being. All these convinced Setiloane to hold the firm view that African traditional ideas about humanity, society and the divinity at work in

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intuition (to borrow from Setiloane's expression), confirmed by his engagement with African Studies, convinced him that there is an inadequate understanding of the forces and principles, mainly religious, but often dismissed as superstition by early missionaries, anthropologists and the Church, that lie behind African ideas about humanity, society and divinity. African traditional society as Setiloane saw it, (and he drew mainly from the Southern Bantu context, in particular, the Basotho and Batswana) had a deeper and more adequate sensitivity and perception of the divine at work in human relationships, society and nature at large.

Setiloane attempted to define African theology, using EW Smith's expressing, in the foreword to Geoffrey Parrinder's *West African Religion* (Epworth Press, 1947), the hope that "(S)omeday Parrinder or someone equally competent will follow up this study of the pagan religion with a study of the actual religion of those Africans who in various degrees of reality have accepted Christianity."¹⁴

The key question that moved Setiloane from the mentioned publication is: Do preachers and teachers deliberately set themselves to relate the new religion to the old? The latter question encouraged Setiloane to conclude as follows:

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 African-ness. It is also a "cultural" theology because it holds and thrives on the assumption that every people understand Reality, and therefore Divinity, and interpret it culturally.¹⁵

Setiloane further defines African theology as an attempt to understand the relation of God in Jesus Christ through the experience of the African world-view. Its challenge to the normally accepted so-called ecumenical theology is that it clouds the issue of Christian Revelation, because it is in fact an understanding, through the Western cultural world-view over the years, which it now, by the claim of Christian orthodoxy imposes wherever the Christian message is welcome and accepted.

them (Theology) may be much nearer the purposes and intentions of the *Kerugma* than Western Christianity.

¹⁴ Setiloane unpublished papers.

¹⁵ Setiloane unpublished papers.

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How Setiloane developed his sense of African theology

For Setiloane, the missionaries were the first to demonstrate an interest in the religiosity of the African people, which they experienced as a hurdle in their calling to transmit their message. He (Setiloane) emphasised:

The emergence of the study Social Anthropology, which excited the curiosity of many of them (the missionaries) somewhat, diverted their observation of the phenomenon as a religious one. They, for a long time would not accept it as Religion. Hence their very informative studies like W.C. Willoughby's *Nature Worship and Taboo* (Hartford Seminary Press, 1932) and the *Soul of the Bantu* (SCM, 1928) invariably made appearance under ethnology and not religion in public libraries. To this day much material on the religious practices of the Africans is hidden in missionaries' writings as Biography and Travelogue Backhouse: *A Narrative of a visit to Mauritius and South Africa* (H Adams, London 1844), JT Brown, *Among the Bantu nomads* (Sealey Service, London 1926) etc. The most usefully informative material are the records of the very early missionaries, which in fact laid down the foundation for the study, Social Anthropology, e.g. R Moffat: *Missionaries labours and scenes in South Africa*, (J Snow, London, 1842), E Casalis: *The Basutos* (J Nisbert, London 1865), G Mackenzie: *Ten years North of the Orange River* (Edinburgh, 1871) and Samuel Broadbent: *The introduction of Christianity among the Barolong Tribes of South Africa* (WMH, London 1865).¹⁶

According to Setiloane, the late 1920s was very fertile as far as the development of literary records of the various aspects of African religious practice was concerned. Among others, WC Willoughby's book was produced then. However, for Setiloane, it is EW Smith who was the first to recognise the peculiar phenomenon in Africa among the South African people as *Religio*.¹⁷

For this development of accepting the so-called "customs" and "practices" of the African people before the advent of Christianity as worthy of study as an expression of religion, credit goes to the Kennedy School of

¹⁶ Setiloane unpublished papers.

¹⁷ Setiloane refers to both the International Missionary Conference of Le Zoute, Belgium, 1926 and the "powerful" comment made by Smith at the Christian Mission in Africa Conference held at the Edinburgh House, London 1926 that: To one who is convinced of the working of the Eternal Spirit in the African's past the question presses home: How can I guide my people so that while becoming true disciples of Christ they may remain true Africans?

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Missions, Hartford, USA. It set up a Chair of African Missions to which distinguished missionaries from Africa, like WC Willoughby were attracted. EW Smith himself spent some time there. It is to the period of reflection that they both spent there that current mission studies owe some of their works, such as *The Golden School*, (CMS, 1927), *The shrine of a people's soul* (SCM, 1929) and much later: *African ideas of God* (London, 1950).

Some insights into early development of African Christian expression

Setiloane argues that some of the early agents of the mission were afforded the opportunity to study abroad. For Setiloane, they must have been challenged greatly while abroad to look at the faith. During this time two valuable contributions were made by Africans of the Church of Scotland Mission, namely Tiyo Soga's *The Ama Xhosa: life and custom* (Lovedale Press, 1931) and JB Danquaah's *The Akan doctrine of God* (London, 1944). After these first books, SM Molema: *The Bantu: past and present* (W Green, Edinburgh, 1920) and Soga's *The South Eastern Bantu* are more ethnographic, and J Kenyatta: *Facing Mount Kenya*, although a much later work, follows the same line.¹⁸ According to Setiloane, the appearance of Bengt Sundkler's *Bantu prophets in South Africa* (Edinburgh Press, 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 the harm to divert attention from the development of the study of the religions of Africa, seriously examining the content of African religiosity from a theological perspective, which EW. Smith and WC. Willoughby had laid the foundation for. On the West Coast, however, G. Parrinder was devoted [sic] prodding along, and about the same time as Sundkler, published *West Africa Religion* (London 1949), which carried on the tradition of a sympathetic Christian Missionary appraisal. However, it was left to John V. Taylor's *Primal Vision* (SCM, 1963) to reinstate the subject of African religiosity in the church and mission circles. *Primal vision* coincided with the great spiritual awakening, which spread over the African continent at the time when Senghor's *Negritude* was beginning

¹⁸ According to Setiloane the decade mid-1930s to mid-1940s is rather barren in literature. It may well be because it was then that the IMC was making contact with Africa after the Tambaran, India, Conference of 1936. Also following the appearance of Ethiopianism on the scene, much thinking and debate was being given to the question: *What shall be the nature of the church in Africa?* B. Ross and E. Jacottet's running correspondence in "The Christian Express" (SA) and Leas' "The Separatist Church Movement in South Africa" (WM MS, 1027) are examples.

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to penetrate and the assertion of African personality permeated all crevices of social and political life fanning the fire of African Nationalism against Colonialism.¹⁹

Additional developments to be acknowledged

Setiloane acknowledges the contribution made by JV Taylor's publication which according to him is not comparable to G Parrinder's works. As he argues:

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 Bolaji Idowu's *Oludumara: God in Yoruba Belief* (SCM, 1962). By means of this work Bolaji Idowu established himself as the *Father of the African theology*. His (Idowu) books: *Toward an Indigenous Church* (London 1965) and *African Traditional Religion: a Definition* (SCM Press, 1973), argues Setiloane, err too much in the area of ecclesiastical and theological polemic. 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, Uganda, followed with John Mbiti and his *African religions and philosophy* (Heinemann, 1969) and concepts of *God in Africa* (SPCK, 1970). At about the same time in Francophone Africa, Msgr. Vincent Mulago was taking further Placide Tempel's insights of *Force Vitale* into a passionate and comprehensive interpretation of the "participation in a common life" among the Bashi people as the main, if not the only, basic of all their community, life and its institutions in *Un visage africain du christianisme* (Paris, 1965). In Bolaji Idowu, Vincent Mulago and John Mbiti for the first time African Christian scholars were doing what E.W. Smith had hoped would be done; namely 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, which were then at their peak. Then the formation of All Africa Conference of Churches, Kampala, 1963, provided a welcome vehicle for future development. At its inaugural Assembly

¹⁹ Setiloane unpublished papers.

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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*, edited by Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, 1969. The French title best expresses its aims and purpose: *Pour une theologie Africains* (Editions CLE, Yaoundé, 1969).²⁰

Then the field was open for all, making African theology a matter to be discussed all over the continent. Harry Sawyer and Fashule-Luke of Sierra Leone, Seth Nomenyo of Togo and others came to this important dialogue. Setiloane refers to the fact that even

Interpreters of the African understanding of Christianity made their appearance all over the continent, and the subject became material for senior theological studies in African universities and abroad. By mid-1970s African theology was so established that it became the theme of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission in Accra, Ghana, in 1973. In Francophone Africa, besides Vincent Mulago, Fr. Englebrecht Mveng of Cameroon, Rev. Seth Nomenyo of Togo and much later Fr. Ngindu Mushete of Zaire who continued Vincent Mulago's work at the Centre d'Etudes des Religion Africaines Universite Lovanium, Kinshasa, were very prominent.

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 effort 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*" (edited by HJ Becken, Durban, 1973), as also well Setiloane's on: *The Selfhood of the Church*, AACC Assembly, Kampala, 1963, were heard here and there.

Principal themes of African theology

Setiloane mentions four key themes of African theology.

²⁰ Setiloane unpublished papers.

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- *Umntu* – humanity and ancestors

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 lightly over it. They all defend it, even to the extent of finding some new names to explain it to foreigners, for example “The Living Dead” (Mbiti). Actually, the concept of ancestors is bound together with the African understanding of *Umntu-Motho*, that is, its estimate of the human person (man). This understanding is embedded in the view that the human person is incorruptible and persists after corporal death. The belief that the human person shares in Divinity is much more pronounced and practically acknowledged in African theology than in Western Theology, which seems to be contrasted to shy off from it as reminiscent of *Humanism*, a heresy of the last century in the West. Africans declare simply that *Motho ke Modimo* – a human person – is something sacred or even divine, that is, it participates in Divinity, without necessarily claiming equality with it.

African theology from African traditional religion, declares Setiloane, views the human being *umuntu-motho* as dynamic. The human is *force vitale* (Tempels); in as much as it possesses *seriti-isithunzi*, a magnetic energy, which makes it a relating entity in “vital participation” (Mulango) with similar entities, which may be human or not. That this human “vital force”, *serithi-isithunzi*, is derived from the all-pervasive, original, determining Vital Force, Modimo, which is the Source of Being, accounts for human indestructibility and, therefore, continuation in “vital participation” as ancestors after corporal death. This continued life of the human after death is not for its own sake, but for the continued sustenance of the physically living, as well as for ethical-moral purposes of ensuring righteous dealing between humans, as also between humans and other beings in nature, animate as well as inanimate. Ancestors are “the guardians of the morality” (Daryl Forde) of the group, that is, community in family or tribe or nation. They discharge this responsibility with excellence and effect because they are Badimo, *Va-dimu*, *Wa-zinu* (Swahili), literally “the people of Modimo (Divinity) and transmitters of Modimo’s essence, energy, Vital Force” (Sawyer: *God ancestor or creator*, London, 1970; Setiloane, 1976).

- Community

For Setiloane, African theology makes much of community. A human person’s worth inheres and is rooted in belonging: *I belong, therefore I am* (Mbiti). 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 being interacts with other beings in and with the cosmos. “For the Bantu (as with other Africans) beings maintain an intimate on the relation-

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ships with one another” (Mulago). 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 between them. Therefore, at any one time, any community is more than the sum total of the physical elements that compose it. Thus, community is a cauldron; an interlocking circuit in which the members, not only human, exist interdependently.

Because Africans bring with them this kind of rich sense of community into the ecumenical concourse, often their expectations and demands of others whom they associate with, especially in the Christian Church, where much is made of *koinonia* as the desired goal, can be and have been rather strenuous. It could result in disenchantment with what is presented as Christian forms, and has in fact done so, for example the indigenous Church movement. 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 (Acts).

- The concept or image of God

The unique contribution of the African theology, argues Setiloane, is its insistence that *Divinity-Modimo* is *Force Vitale*. Arriving on the scene at the height of the honest to God, God is Dead debate; African theology diffused that line of thinking, which could only come from 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 *otherness*, because the God the African has associated with the teaching of the missionaries has had to compete with numerous concepts of deities and divinities from the traditional African background. Consequently, when African theologians themselves began to make the comparison, they emerged with a conviction that Western Christian concepts of Divinity are not adequate, but a diminution and devaluation of their inherited African concepts (Kibicho, C Gaba [Ghana], GM Setiloane). For instance, etymological and ethnographic research reveals the Basotho-Batswana concept or image of Divinity as of a Power, a Force, a Presence in the universe (EW Smith; Tempels) 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 (Mulago). This, therefore, renders religious experience inescapable and irresistible. *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 the so-called 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 there is a multiplicity of smaller divinities among the various peoples that need to be

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approached and worshipped on different occasions. This is not a universal African phenomenon. Of universal application, however, are, firstly, the ancestors, “who are very prominent in religious belief and practice” throughout the continent, “always near and normally attentive” (EW Smith), and, secondly, the idea of a Supreme or Higher Deity above all the other divinities (Masoga 2010; 2012).

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). There are various regional names for this phenomenon. They all agree in the fact that they describe the same experience and reality. It is these names, which in the different places the translators employed to denote the Biblical concept, God. Invariably, the Deity which the name described was placed far above and in control of the other deities who might belong to any particular people’s pantheon. Hence is its association with the Old Testament Yahweh.

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: “They ascribe to Him the attributes of Almighty and Omnipresent; they believe He created the Universe” (Bosman 1905). 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), whose origins cannot be determined, who “interpenetrates and permeates all being; is Unknowable (an Enigma): the source of being” (Setiloane 1976).

- Progress made so far

Setiloane persistently asked the question: Where are we as regards the content of what we stand for so adamantly? In answering this question, he sketched a number of developmental phases in this regard, ranging from the academic study with Ibadan and Makerere as leading centres in the nineteen hundreds. It is a pity that Bulaji Idowu’s book *African traditional religion: a definition* hit the printers so late (1973). By then, John Mbiti had already filled up the hungry minds in Africa and abroad with his apologetic work, coupling African religiosity with philosophy, and much too simplistically drawing up similarities and agreements between the African traditional understanding and the Christian faith. At the same time, very significant contributions were being made especially in Francophone Africa by Monsignor Vincent Mulago of Kinshasa, with his *Participation Vitale*²¹ taking the

²¹ A contribution by that name in KA Dickson & P Ellingworth eds. 1969. *Biblical revelation and African beliefs*. London: Lutherworth. However, M Mulago and Cikala’s impact and

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Placide Tempels, *Force Vitale* idea to its logical and indigenous conclusion, and Fr. Englebert Mveng of the Cameroon who came at it all in a more pragmatic manner of finding African liturgical symbols. In this regard, the Anglophone Africans have also been robbed of tasting the contributions of Pastor Seth Nomanyo of Togo, who, as a Theological Secretary of CEVA, pushed African theological challenges into the French-speaking Protestant world.²²

Content-wise, Setiloane voiced strongly 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 not 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 verbalization of experience of the Divinity at work, difference in environment means different experiences of these 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.²³

The following areas are considered to have been sufficiently covered, according to Setiloane:

- African myths concerning the origin of things

Here Setiloane uses the Southern African context. The African myths concerning the origin of humanity and things made much more sense with all the knowledge man has acquired to date, than the Creation Myths of Genesis,²⁴

unique contribution is best reflected in the French edition *Pour une Theologie Africaine*, ed. Yaoundé, 1969.

²² Mveng's and Nomenyo's views were very forcefully expressed at the WCC Faith and Order Conference, Accra 1974, and are prefaced in their contributions to the Preparatory material for that Conference (unpublished) 1974.

²³ Setiloane unpublished papers.

²⁴ See Setiloane published article: *Confessing Christ today*, in *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*. Vol. 12, September 1975:29-38. Also "Christus heute bekennen: aus der Afrikanische Sicht von Mensch und Gemeinschaft" in *Zeitschrift für Mission*, vol. 2, No. 1, 1976.

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which, by the way, were myths (i.e. verbalisation of the experience) of a particular group of people and have become universalised by Christian teaching. Judaism is not guilty of this crime of universalising them.

- Human community

In these myths, which portray a human being as first seen in Community, according to Setiloane, one finds the seed of the deep African understanding of Community. It is this instinctive feel for Community which can be deemed behind our madness at Bangkok or at any point where Christianity does not do justice to it. As he suggests,

I suggest that it is this instinct for Community, which has made us AACC see no dichotomy between Christianity and Violence, which liberated and established a just and harmonious community. When you criticize Burgess Carr for seeing the Cross or its violence as ushering in an area of liberated men in a harmonious community, remember he is not speaking Western learned Theology, which he knows very well, but what he feels with his blood (guts American will say) as an African. We individuals have agreed all on this. Community comes before individuals or groups of individuals. And when we read the scriptures we find ourselves confirmed. We therefore find African Theological understanding confirming Christian Biblical Teaching – not that I do not say Christian Theological Understanding, which we find adulterated at the points of the second and third dimensions” (as treated above).

The next steps – an African Divinity

What Setiloane found out throughout his research journey is that African Christians in fact Africanise the Christian Western God concept and thus raise it to the level of their concept of Modimo, which is much higher. For instance, the story at Lobatse:

So my sweet old lady Methodist Manyano woman informant at Lobatse says: “We have learnt nothing new about religion from the missionaries. All they have taught us is *thabologo* = *Western civilization and way of life*.” But we are bringing something to Christianity: a view of Divinity much higher, deeper and all pervasive. That is why we quarrel so much with our Christian brothers at Ecumenical gatherings. Our expectations from Christianity are different because we come with

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different presuppositions and different views of the over-ruling determining Divinity, which we all together profess to confess in the Christian fold.²⁵

If so then, concludes Setiloane,

With our higher understanding of Divinity than Western Christian Theology why are we continuing in the Christian fold? I must confess that these days I even find an Ecumenical Bible Study session with my Western Christian Theologian brothers rather irksome and a bore. Not only why we remain in the Christian fold but as one West African Christian young man asked me in Bezel: “Why do we then continue to seek to convert the devotees of ATR?”²⁶

The question why we are still in the Christian fold can be answered in different ways. For Setiloane, he felt like someone who had been bewitched and found it difficult to shake off the Christian witchcraft with which he had been bewitched for more than 150 years (Masoga 2010; 2012). In this regard, he mentioned,

I cannot say I necessarily like where I am. Secondly, I rationalize my position by taking the view that to be Christian I do not have to endorse every detail of so-called Western Christian Orthodox Historical Theology. Instead it is enough that I confess “Jesus as the Christ of God” i.e. as the most unique unprecedented and so far unrepeated or surpassed human manifestation of Divinity. Note here that I do not say “God” as that might restrict. Is it not the most ancient Creed of Christian before the advent of the second and third dimension simply that “Jesus the Christ is the son of God”. It is the theologians of the first five centuries who kept messing it up, the most erroneous ones succeeding because of political reasons.²⁷

As I see it, the next task of the African theology is seriously to grapple with the question of Christology - who is Jesus? How does he become the supreme human manifestation of the Divinity? What does Messiah-ship or Christos become in the African context? Setiloane argued that “Some German theologians were scandalized when I suggested that I would like to look for the Messiah Christos idea in African thinking somewhere in the area of African”

²⁵ Setiloane unpublished papers.

²⁶ Setiloane unpublished papers.

²⁷ Setiloane unpublished papers and Setiloane-Masoga interviews, 2002, Kroonstad.

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*Bongaka*²⁸ and possession of individual persons by Divinity (Masoga 2010; 2012).

As Setiloane argues, for African divinity this next challenge is African scholarship undertaken by Africans themselves, and should be coupled with serious work into Pneumatology and African Divinity. Another area that needs immediate attention, especially in Southern Africa, is the subtle tension between Black Theology versus African theology (Masoga 2010; 2012).

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²⁸ Setiloane defined *ngaka* as an African traditional doctor often derogatively called "witchdoctor". For a fuller treatment of this view see his book publication *Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, AA Balkema & Son: Rotterdam. 1976:317, Chapter 4 & 5.

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