


John Mbiti: An African theologian fifty years and beyond

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This article provides an overview of John Mbiti and his African theology over the past half a century. It discusses how African theology has moved from being unwritten to more deliberate, organised, and written forms of articulation since the 1950s. It also discusses the life, teachings, writings and convictions of John S. Mbiti known as the 'Father of African Theology' who passed away in 2019. Mbiti's contribution to African theological epistemologies is plausible and has for ages reasserted itself within the mainstream theological studies. Mbiti put African spirituality worldview into perspective and made it a discipline acceptable by both African and international academics. Key concerns of African theology include inculturation of the gospel into the African context, liberation from forces hindering Africans, communicating Christ's message in an African manner, and asserting African self-identity and universality of the gospel. The article outlines some of the major themes of Mbiti's African theology since the mid-20th century. It hopes to sketch an emerging agenda for African Christian theologies in the 21st century. This emerging agenda is African theology beyond Mbiti, which is a call to current African scholars from all the academic disciplines to take Mbiti's convictions further by expanding them into the broader epistemologies.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This is an interdisciplinary study engaging history, theology, sociology, African spirituality and philosophy. It is a reminder to African scholars that theology transported from the West by the colonisers fails to glean the richness of African worldviews. The study repositions African philosophy back into the academic deliberations.

Keywords: African theology; culture; inculturation; time; life; eschatology; ubuntu.

Introduction

Through literature study, this article introduces one of the great theologians Africa has ever produced, John Samuel Mbiti from Kenya. His biography is sketched to introduce him to the readers. This is followed by the summary of his famous writings from which his theology is extracted. A brief reference is made that his thoughts were provoked by the popular belief that Africa was a spiritual hollow, with no religion or civilisation. The method used to thwart this idea is inculturation, which is the promotion of engaging socio-cultural and religious cosmology within the African context, involving African values, cultures and traditions. The conclusion is that current African theologians should build on Mbiti's *Sasa* and *Zamani* time concepts to actualise Christian eschatology, increase christological constructs to locate Christ rightfully as African Christians, promote Mbiti's *ubuntu* theology to enhance African communalism, and finally dialogue with other disciplines for better humanness in the cosmos.

Biographical milestones

Gleaning from Mbiti's biographer Francis Anekwe Oborji (in Bonk 1999:71–83) and Bénézet Bujo (2013:37–39), one can sketch his obituary as follows: John Samuel Mbiti was born in 1931, in Mulango, a village in the district of Kitui, Eastern part of central Kenya from Akamba ethnic group. His name 'Mbiti' means 'child dedicated to God'. Probably, the name was given to stave off the high mortality rate that was common in the area.

He started his primary education in Kitui and proceeded to Alliance High School in Kikuyu territory, which was a very strong territory of Protestant Churches of Kenya. This is where Mbiti experienced culture shock for the first time as he encountered ethnic culture different from his own and fell under the influence of the highly religious and pious headmaster of the school. Mbiti completed high school in 1950, and proceeded to Makerere University in Uganda, experiencing another culture shock as an international student and encountered an ecumenical

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touch as he interacted with the Catholic Christians. He sensed a calling into priesthood, although he specialised in English, sociology and geography. By 1954, young Mbiti went to study theology at Barrington College in Rhode Island, USA. After completion, he returned to his home country, Kenya where for 2 years he taught at Kagunda Teachers College. He was given an opportunity as a lecturer in Christianity in Eastern Africa by Selly Oak College of Birmingham, UK. From there, he moved to the University of Cambridge to pursue his theological studies. In 1963, he completed his thesis titled *Christian Eschatology in Relation to Evangelisation of Tribal Africa*. Thereafter, the young Dr Mbiti was ordained as an Anglican priest, and for a while worked at St Albans Parish. In 1964, he returned to Makerere University where, for a decade, he taught in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy. After 10 years, he was called to work for the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Geneva, Switzerland. He was appointed a Director of that Institute in 1976, the position he held until 1980. After this, he dedicated himself to the parish work in the Reformed Church of the Canton of Bern, simultaneously doing part-time teaching as a professor of theology at the University of Bern. He continued residence in Burgdorf, Switzerland where most of his theology was penned and communicated.

Mbiti passed on in Bergdorf on 05 October 2019 at the age of 87. He received lots of criticism from conservative evangelicals. The notable criticism was from the Ugandan writer Okot p'Bitek for casting his arguments in intellectual terms that had been established by the West. Specifically, his biggest criticism was that African cosmologies ultimately align with Christian views of God as omnipotent, omnipresent and eternal. P'Bitek wrote in his own book *African Religions in Western Scholarship* that the African traditional religions are beyond recognition to the ordinary Africans in the countryside.

Mbiti's literature

Mbiti's publication record is captured by Agboada (2023:315) that 'In the over 400 published articles, reviews, and books on theology, religion, philosophy, and literature, Africa remained the focus of his academic scholarship'. Mbiti's well and broadly read monograph is *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) and has since been reprinted a few times. This was followed by some of his well-known books such as *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970), *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (1971), *The Prayers of African Religion* (1975), *An Introduction to African Religion* (1975), and *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (1986).

He contributed articles to many journals, presented papers at international conferences, and was a guest of honour at many theological colloquiums, and contributed many chapters in volumes. He was studied and evaluated by many esteemed African theological scholars such as Julius Gathogo, J.K. Mugambi, J.K. Olupona and others.

Plausibility of African theology

The colonial powers together with their missionary yokefellows idealised the concept that Africa was a spiritual hollow, with no religion or civilisation. Kiaziku (2009) points out that:

[M]issionaries were convinced that in going to Africa they were going to begin their activities on a *tabula rasa in qua nihil erat scriptum*, a black sheet, if not downright, paganism, where there was nothing that could be called a religious function of the soul. (p. 11)

African theology emerged as a strategy to refute this misconception. African theology aims to reflect Christian traditions and the African reality from an African world view. It seeks to incarnate the Christian faith within African culture. Pobee (1979:32–34) argues that the task of African theology is basically to discern the cultural elements that contribute towards natural knowledge of God, and how to adapt these elements to communicate authentic Christianity. African theology is, therefore, a theology that:

[C]annot happen without considering the spiritual and religious values indicative of divine presence within and among the African peoples prior to the historical arrival of the explicit gospel message in the continent. (Magesa in Opongo & Bere 2021:53)

It is an effort to develop a theology 'which will reflect some of the religious insights of the primal world view and put them in a Christian context' (Cameron 1977:91). The development of African theology was influenced by socio-political happenstances such as African independent movements, cultural, and African spirituality factors. The post-colonial Africa embarked on the rediscovery of African culture and religion that were marginalised and devalued by colonial powers. Mawusi (2015:11) echoes this sentiment that 'The imposition of Western imperial practices of Christianity as the only true religion, which they have urged us to follow, must now come under some scrutiny'. These disparaging practices did not significantly dislodge Africans from their religious roots. Africans do not, consequent to their conversion to Christianity, dispense with their spirituality. It is clearly realised now, as Nyamiti (1991:42) avers, that 'the majority of the African individuals are still traditionalists in their way of living, and therefore one has to build up a theology which is ... relevant for them'. This was a locus of Mbiti's African theology that Africans:

[C]ome out of African religion but they don't take off their traditional religiosity. They come as they are. They come as people whose world view is shaped according to African religion. (1986:12)

He further elaborated that 'traditional concepts still form the essential background of many African peoples' (1969:xi).

Discourses on African theology started in the 1950s within African Catholic scholars such as Vincent Mulago, Alexis Kagame, Tharcisse Tshibangu and others. These theologians used terms such as adaptation, Africanisation, and indigenisation (Bujo 1992:59). As the self-searching and

self-realisation of African theologians increased, it expanded to the Protestant theologians, and John Mbiti of Kenya emerged as the first among the equals. The evolutionary processes of African theologisation brought forth the concept of inculturation.

Methodology of African theology

Key concerns of African theology include inculturation of the gospel into the African context, liberation from forces hindering Africans, communicating Christ's message in an African manner, and asserting African self-identity and universality of the gospel. Kiaziku (2009) highlights the fact that inculturation,

... is not a matter of bringing the Christ of Biblical revelation to other cultures, but rather, of discovering that Christ is already present in them; one needs to discover and make explicit the Christ who lies hidden in these non-Christian religions. (p. 116)

This inculturation 'has been constructed as a discourse of translation of the "deposit of faith" into the African language' (Bere in Opongo & Bere 2021:161). It is a lived experience with God who lives in a community with his people, as Orobator (2008:152) says: 'Theology develops in context. Our encounter with God happens in time and space. Revelation, or God's self-communication, is immersed in history'. This is the rationale behind Pobee's (1979:32–33) assertion that Christian theology has several formative factors, particularly revelation (the disclosure of divinity to humans in acts, in deeds, and in historical events) and the experience of the divine. This is also mentioned by Obeng (in Gitui 2000:80) that 'God-self-disclosure is manifested in the total life and history of the culture of a given people. Culture is therefore a theological locus'. It has allowed Africans to express their faith through African languages, music, dance, and cultural practices. Mbiti championed contextual theology from an African perspective by arguing that 'the God in the Bible was no different from the one worshipped as "Creator and Omnipotent" in the Traditional African Communities before the advent of Christianity' (1970, 1980). In agreement with Agboada (2023:315), for Mbiti, 'there was an urgent need for a new theological framework and conceptualisation that takes seriously the social, cultural and religious cosmology and context of Africa into consideration'. In a nutshell, his African theology was through inculturation which is the process of the interaction between Christianity and cultures, thereby making African theology a contextual theology. It is therefore a correctly stated epistemological conclusion that:

African theology designates discourse on God (and all that is related to him) in an African way... it is a discourse on God in accordance with the African mentality and needs and aspirations. (Nyamiti in Wabanhu & Moerschbacher 2017:29)

African theology beyond Mbiti

However, Mbiti's theology remains a wide and a deep well to draw water from and be tapped and scrutinised. The following are just the highlights to expand on Mbiti by the modern African scholarship:

- The Congolese Catholic theologian, Bujo (2013) boldly labels Mbiti as a pioneer of the *Sasa* (micro-time) and *Zamani* (macro-time) theology. These are the Swahili-oriented time concepts that can be applied in understanding creation of the universe by God and are the pivot of Mbiti's theological thought. Mbiti belabours the fact that the concept of time is instrumental in explaining belief systems, attitudes, and lifestyles of African peoples. African perception of time makes logic in encountering political, economic, educational and ecclesiastical contexts (Bujo 2013:39). Mbiti (2010:16–17) opines that time has two dimensions, which are a long past and a present, but virtually no future. Western linear concept of time (past, present, future) is foreign to African thinking. African perception of time, in its double dimension of present and past, is an African understanding of the individual, the community, and the universe with its five ontological categories (2010:17) such as god, spirits, humans, animals and plants, as well as other phenomena and objects without biological life (2010:15–16).

In considering *Sasa* (micro-time), it is the concept that covers the now-period, with the sense of immediacy, of nearness, and of newness (2010:18). It is a time period with a future, present and past, entailing the future that is realistic and certain to an extent that it can be actualised, and has nearly passed away (2010:21–22). Mbiti elaborates this that 'When people live in this kind of future, they have virtually experienced it' (1971:160).

Zamani (macro-time) is the past, which also has its own past, present and future. It is observed that *Sasa* and *Zamani* are intertwined, as they intersect so that *Sasa* can feed or disappear into *Zamani*. Events are actualised and realised within a *Sasa* dimension before becoming incorporated into the *Zamani*. Once this happens, events quit *Sasa* to join *Zamani*, 'a period beyond which there is nothing' (2010:22). Events move back and forth between *Sasa* and *Zamani* to create history which according to Mbiti is not progressing towards the future but backwards, which is from *Sasa* to *Zamani*. There is, therefore, no eschatological conceptualisation of the doom for the world or a Golden Age to be anticipated. These rhapsodies are deep African time thoughts and difficult for linear time thinkers to fathom.

How does this time concept articulate or instigate theologians living beyond Mbiti's era? This question is very crucial in considering Mbiti's legacy and footprints in postcolonial era. It is theologically accepted that God is not time-bound. The African concept of God is the Creator God who sustains all that he created and that his being is from beyond the ancient times. 'He is more ancient than the "Zamani" period ... his transcendence does not stand in the way of his immanence' (Bujo 2013:48), because 'he is personally involved in his creation' (2010:29–73). This notion is fully elaborated in his *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970) and *The Prayers of African Religion* (1975). Modern African theologians can enhance their doctrinal dictum of

God's immutability, transcendence, and immanence by expanding the timelessness of God ontologically utilising *Sasa* and *Zamani* that the God of NOW is the same as the God of FOREVER.

- Mbiti's eschatology is open and eclectic in some ways. For the current researchers, the question should be 'How Africans understand immortality and Jesus as the *eschaton* and how to weigh this against the biblical eschatology? Mbiti defines two streams between personal (*Sasa*-period) and collective immortality, with the living still remembering the deceased, therefore keeping them in the present time. The deceased at this stage are known as the living-dead and remain as such until remembered no more. This state can stretch for four to five generations. After that the living-dead pass onto the *Zamani* and fall from personal to collective immortality (Mbiti 1969:25 and 156, 1971:164–165, 1975:125). In *Zamani*, they become the spirits; to some extent, they are forgotten and become sexless to finally become 'myriads of spirits who have lost their humanness' (1969:158).

The Golden Age is not an eschatological expectation for Africans. It is not in future, but in the past (*Zamani*). According to Mbiti, Africans do not perceive end-times or a consummation of history as the highest spiritual epoch. There is no eschatological judgement in waiting for the rebels, or any resurrection to be hoped for or expected. 'One is simply gathered to one's forefathers, and that is about all' (Mbiti 1971:166). This opens a wide door for theologians beyond Mbiti to make comparisons between Mbiti's African eschatology and Christian eschatology which is richly christological. Mbiti claims that eschatology is not foreign to African thought, but it is devoid of teleology (Bujo 2013:53). 'This is an area where Christian eschatology can make a radical contribution to God's natural revelation in Africa. Eschatology without teleology is as empty as a house without furniture' (1971:181).

- Mbiti is remarkably known for African *ubuntu* philosophy, the communal concept that is widely applied by modern African theologians to express communion ecclesiology, and a 'guiding principle of African peoples' ethical behaviour' (Magesa 1998:66). Mbiti (1969) expressed this philosophy:

Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. (pp. 108–109)

Ubuntu theology expresses African communality which opens a wide theological dialogue as a way of decolonial project. In five of his books, excluding *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (1986), he highlights the communal and humane (*ubuntu*) nature of African indigenous religion in more than 2 000 ethnic groups that reside in Africa. He goes on to describe Africa's indigenous societies as monotheist, ethnic nationalities with names for the Supreme God. The signification of this philosophy

is captured by Stinton (2004:168) that 'individual identity is established and fulfilled only in the context of community. To be is essentially to participate in family and community'. Individuals cannot be understood in isolation, therefore, 'cannot have personal identity without reference to other persons' (Sindima in Birch et al 1990:144). *Ubuntu* can be described using other words such as relationship, bondedness, communality, togetherness. Opoku (1978:483) captures it proverbially that 'Life is when you are together, alone you are an animal.' The concept has created an open door for interdisciplinary epistemologies and ontologies in the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, spirituality, leadership and management, etc.

There are numerous publications recently on African *ubuntu* philosophy in both management sciences and theological constructs. One can think of scholars such as Khoza (1994), Buthelezi (1990), Boon (1998), Tutu (1999), Mbigi (2000), Broodryk (2007), Williams (2013), Meiring (2015), Elianstam (2015), Resane (2017), Mzondi (2019) etc. and these are not only from the theological field but from management, philosophy, politics, psychology, and anthropology sciences.

- If there is a biblical doctrine that is at the crossroads in Africa, it is Christology (Resane 2020). There is a christological crisis, which is 'a lack of critical and systematic reflection on Jesus Christ by Africans in light of their own cultural inheritance and identity' (Stinton 2004:18). It looks like 'African concepts of Christology do not exist' (Mbiti 1972:51). Christology is contending with ancestors in African world view and cosmic powers. This leads to understanding Christ's person (Christology), functions (soteriology) and life in African world view (anthropology) and how this understanding correlates with a biblical meaning of life. Mbiti rightly observes that some interest is growing among many African scholars to develop an African Christology (1986:50–51). Significantly among scholars such as Bujo's Christ as Proto-ancestor (1992), Schreiter's Faces of Jesus in Africa through the lenses of various scholars (ed. 1991), Bediako's presence of Christ in the struggle of culture for democracy (2004), and Stinton's Jesus of Africa (2004), one sees contentions of Christology located in African continent. Stinton (2004:15) is correct that there are some contemporary African theologians who stress Jesus' centrality within African Christianity; and that there is a critical need to articulate the reality and the significance of Christ in African Christian lives. Mbiti reiterated that 'Christian Theology ought properly to be Christology, for Theology falls or stands on how it understands, translates and interprets Jesus Christ at a given Time, Place and human situation' (1971:190). Because there are proliferations of christological interpretations regarding Christ's identity and role in African human affairs, the field is widely open for researchers to take it further where Mbiti left off.
- Enhancing theological understanding through dialogue where African theology can be enriched through finding

common ground with fundamental Christianity. Mbiti can be justifiably labelled a theologian of dialogue. His *ubuntu* theology guarantees African communalism where dialogue is a fundamental and distinctive characteristic of African community. Theology of dialogue is a cultural fabric of discourses about divinity. Entering discourses with diverse cultures, theological persuasions, and ideologies was Mbiti's preference to arrive at his conclusions. He studied cultures and showed interest in history and poetry where he dialogued with diverse opinions. Even in the theological field he was intradisciplinary, dialoguing on and with several disciplines such as exegesis, systematics, pastoral theology and spirituality (Bujo 2013:37). His studies at Makerere University in Uganda opened the doors for him into the ecumenical dialogues, especially with the Catholics (Olupona 1993:1–9). Theology of dialogue is integral to understanding theologies beyond one's confined theological convictions. Dialogue is a sign of maturity, and human harmony and cohesion are possible through dialogue, especially in the field of theology, which addresses spiritualities and people's inner convictions of seeking God and how he is involved in human affairs.

Conclusion

Mbiti felt that there is a new theological framework and conceptualisation that builds on the cultural and religious socio-cosmology within the African context. As far as he was concerned, the God of the Bible preached by the colonisers was no different from the one worshipped as 'Omnipotent Creator' in African communities (1980:817–820). He refuted the idea that Africans possessed no religion by arguing that Africans did not only possess an organised religion but also had a notion of the Supreme Being (1970). Mbiti agrees that Africans never possessed liturgical prayers written in books or elsewhere, yet possessed authentic spirituality (1975). Religion is therefore an ontological phenomenon with questions about existence or being. For him 'to live is to be caught up in a religious drama' (Agboada 2023:316).

His scholarship restored the dignity of African traditional religions, thus creating some thirst for further enquiries, critical engagement with authentic issues raised within or by African traditions. It awakened self-reflections on what it means to be a black African and a Christian at the same time (Agboada 2023:316). The method of inculturation he used can therefore be a legitimate tool to theologise in African context. An appeal is made that modern African theologians should engage Mbiti's *Sasa* and *Zamani* concept to enhance and actualise Christian eschatology from an African perspective. This will enhance proper christological beliefs as Christ is in competition with African ancestral beliefs. Proper Christology assists African Christians to locate Christ in proper perspective as Lord and Saviour for human depravity, where humans desperately need redemption. All these can be achieved or actualised through dialogical processes that aim to foster harmonious human cohesion in the cosmos.

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K.T.R. is the sole author of this research article.

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