



African Christian Theology and Christology: A Study of the Contributions of Kwame Bediako, John S. Mbiti, Justin Ukpong and Charles Nyamiti

Edward Agboada¹ 

¹ Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi - Ghana.

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the scholarship of Kwame Bediako, John Mbiti, Justin Ukpong and Charles Nyamiti to decipher their contributed to the development of a framework for theology, Christology and biblical scholarship in Africa and the development of the African context as an alternative to theology, Christology and biblical scholarship in Africa and beyond. The article used a combination of methods for data collection, interpretation and analysis. This included (a) the biographical with emphasis on intellectual scholarship. This enabled the researcher to assess the intellectual works of selected scholars. (b) there was also content analysis of primary and secondary sources across literature and scholars to evaluate the extent of the impact of the writings of the selected scholars. These works were evaluated in context with both contemporary and modern scholarship. The objective was to decipher how their scholarship has advanced the African context for Christian theology, christology and biblical hermeneutics in Africa. The study discovered that since the rise in the need to identify and make an African contribution to the continuous nomenclatures of Christian theology, christology and biblical hermeneutics that recognize the African experience as a critical necessity in the search for a more wholistic and comprehensive theoretical framework for theology, christology and biblical hermeneutics, these scholars made such a huge contribution not on methodology alone but also on conceptualisation. They contributed to a very large extent to the recovery of African dignity, and the establishment of a philosophy, theology, christology and that was authentically African, credible and viable for any academic scholarship. They were also able to explain how the African context contributes to existing scholarship on nomenclatures of normative Christian theology, Christology and biblical hermeneutics in Africa.

Correspondence

Edward Agboada

Email:

agboadaedwards@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

John Samuel Mbiti, Justin Sampson Ukpong, Kwame Bediako, and Charles Nyamiti are considered the few foremost scholars in the study of African Christian theology. Their contribution to theological approaches relevant to the cultural and religious cosmology and context of Africa as well as their demand for the redefinition and conceptualization of what has been the normative nomenclatures, orthodoxy and Christopraxis of western Christianity to incorporate other contexts is a major achievement. Each scholar in their distinct way has contributed immensely to the development of

relevant methodology for theological discourses in Africa which in the 21st century has become the Heartland. For instance, Justin Ukpong one of the pioneers of African biblical scholarship has made massive contributions at the methodological and institutional levels. As a New Testament scholar, he did not only establish a significant field for African biblical scholarship, he broke the hegemonic grip that western Christianity's "contextless" biblical scholarship had on Africa, arguing that the African context should rather become the focus of every biblical interpretation in Africa. He succeeded in creating a concept for a biblical scholarship that was relevant to the African contexts and made a great impact on the many who read the Bible in the African contexts yearning for social change.

Paul Gifford has noted that even though Africans were responding to the Gospel in unprecedented figures, existing theologies brought so much conflict with their cultural and spiritual cosmological orientations.¹ The Western missionary context of the theological discourse failed to answer the critical experiential questions that threatened the spiritual, cultural, and cosmology inquiries as well as those regarding family, kin and society.² Bediako, Mbiti, Ukpong and Nyamiti, particularly focused on drawing corresponding lessons from the way theologians in the Greco-Roman world handled questions that emerged from Hellenistic cultures and how they regarded their pre-Christian intellectual discourses, literary and religious heritage, and their cultural ancestors, as well as how it was possible to be both Greek and Christian at the same time.³ Consequently, there was perhaps no issue so critical than the need to understand this heightened interest in Africa's pre-Christian religious tradition, that is, if Africa's theologies were to be considered serious and her achievements recognized. With scholarship that emerged from a critical assessment of existing concepts that set explicitly the condition for the definition and categorising of accepted nomenclatures of Christian theologies, Bediako, Mbiti, Ukpong and Nyamiti wrote several books in that regard. This article has limited itself to four of their works which are discussed.

The first one is by Mbiti titled "African religions & philosophy" (1990). This is discussed with another one by Bediako titled John Mbiti's contribution to African theology, religious plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti (1993) edited by Jacob Olupona and Sulayman Nyang. This book specifically chronicles the contribution of John Mbiti to African theology. The second one is by Ukpong titled "Inculturation hermeneutics: An African approach to biblical interpretation." *The Bible in a world context: An experiment in contextual hermeneutics* (2002). The focus is on the ontology and historical antecedents to the development of African biblical theology as an authentic alternative to Western theologies. The third one is by Bediako titled, "Understanding African theology in the 20th century" (1993). This is also discussed together with another work by the same author titled "The Roots of African Theology" (1989) in which attention is given to the development of theological paradigms relevant to the African culture, and spiritual cosmology. The fourth one is by Nyamiti titled, "African Theology: Its Nature, Problems and Methods" (1977). A short evaluation of the scholarship garnered from the four scholars will then be discussed with a concentration on implications for African Christianity and theology in the 21st century as a conclusion.

"Theology" from Traditions and Cultural Experiences of Africa

The idea of religion, philosophy or theology that arise out of the context and experience of Africa and their reflection on the supernatural that appropriately addresses their religious needs and feelings is a debate that has preoccupied the majority of academics for many years. Everything about it has been the subject of an elaborate controversy and long academic discourse that has allowed both researchers

¹ Paul, Gifford. "Trajectories in African Christianity." *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 8, no. 4 (2008): 275-289. See also Omenyo, Cephas N. "Agenda for a discussion of African initiatives in Christianity: The West African/Ghanaian case." *Missiology* 39, no. 3 (2011): 373-389.

² Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The renewal of a non-Western religion*. Edinburgh University Press, 1997; Sunday Babajide Komolafe, "The changing face of Christianity: Revisiting African creativity." *Missiology* 32, no. 2 (2004): 217-238. Peter B. Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective: Religious Change in the Modern World*. Routledge, 2004.

³ Kwame, Bediako. "The Roots of African Theology." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13, no. 2 (1989): 58-65.

and students of African religions, philosophy and theology to discuss and digest its foundation and theological praxis. Scholars such as Geertz, Tillich⁴ Durkheim⁵ and Marx⁶ who have distinguished themselves with studies on the definition, classification, characterisation, and philosophy of religions are even unimpressed about the context, content, and value, of Africa's religion, philosophy or theology, as long as it did not manifest in the shape and form of 'the western', This is a critique that scholars such as Magesa,⁷ Sundermeier⁸ and Westerlund⁹ have held for some time. This notwithstanding, African theologians such as Bediako, Mbiti, Ukpong and Nyamiti, just to mention a few, over the years, have demonstrated amidst austerities that Africa's philosophy, theology and religious practices are not merely illusory, neither are they baseless observations, they very much possess the same capacity and quality as the Western to form the basis for sharing the gospel to its people.¹⁰

According to the Anglican Bishop and Noble Prize winner Demond Tutu,¹¹ it is comforting, however, to know that, Africans had genuine knowledge of God and that they had their own means of communicating with deities; ways which mean Africans were able to speak authentically as themselves and not as pale imitators of others. For Opoku¹² this proved that Africa had a store from which it could develop new ways of speaking to and about God. In the view of Olupona¹³ Magesa,¹⁴ Doumbia and Doumbia,¹⁵ Africa's depth of experience of the supernatural and fascination with the physical and spiritual world is what has informed its reality of philosophy, theology, religious expression and practices and these are reliable and cannot be ignored anymore. Being traditional, notwithstanding, did not have to be conceived with a colloquial evaluation to inform ambiguities in an unnecessarily prejudicial and overly critical evaluation, definition, and description. According to Hastings,¹⁶ it is interesting that these same traditions which hitherto were considered to have insignificant theological praxis have come to occupy the centre of the academic stage. Therefore, the contributions of Bediako, Mbiti, Ukpong, and Nyamiti are considered significant. Obviously, this kind of assessment is not only prejudicial but overly critical of the capacity of Africa's traditions and cultural values to provide the appropriate basis for the formation of a religious concept and philosophy which when put together satisfactorily form an authentic religion, like Christianity, Islam, etc.

⁴ Paul Tillich, and James Luther Adams. *What is religion?* Vol. 10. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

⁵ Emile Durkheim, "The elementary forms of religious life." In *Social Theory Re-Wired*, (London Routledge, 2016), 52-67.

⁶ Karl Marx. *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of right*. (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁷ Magesa Laurenti. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. (New York: Orbis Books), 2014.

⁸ Theo Sundermeier, Was ist Religion? Religionswissenschaft in theologischen Kontext [What is religion? Religious studies in a theological context], (Chr Kaiser Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh. 1999).

⁹ David Westerlund. "The Study of African Religions in Retrospect: From "Westernization" to "Africanization"?. " in J.K. Olupona & S.S. Nyang (eds.), *Religious plurality in Africa: Essays in honour of John S. Mbiti*, (Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, New York 1993).

¹⁰ Kwame Bediako. *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*. (New York: Orbis Books, 2004).

¹¹ Desmond Tutu. "Whither African Theology? Christianity in Independent Africa, red." *E. Fasholé-Luke [i in.]*, London (1978): 366; Richard Gray, "Christianity and religious change in Africa." *African Affairs* 77, no. 306 (1978): 89-100; Jennifer L. Aycock, "Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Journal of World Christianity* (2019): 124-125; John S. Pobee, *Skenosis: Christian faith in an African context*. No. 23. (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1992).

¹² Kofi Asare Opoku. "African traditional religion: An enduring heritage." *Religious plurality in Africa* (1993): 67-82; John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*. (Long Grove IL; Waveland Press, 2015); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*. (Portsmouth; Heinemann, 1990).

¹³ Jacob K. Olupona, "African spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions." (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company 2000).

¹⁴ Magesa Laurenti, *What is not sacred? African spirituality*. (Yonker USA: Acton Publishers, 2014).

¹⁵ Adama Doumbia and Naomi Doumbia. *The Way of the Elders: West African Spirituality & Tradition* (Woodbury, Minnesota: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2004).

¹⁶ Adrian Hastings, *African Christianity: An Essay in Interpretation*. (London : Geoffrey Chapman, 1976).50.

The Contributions of John Samuel Mbiti, Justin Sampson Ukpong, Kwame Bediako, and Charles Nyamiti.

John Mbiti

Mbiti, a theologian, philosopher and pastor, is recognised as the forerunner and scholar of the theology of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and inculturation of the Gospel in Africa. His biographer Francis Anekwe Oborji¹⁷ places his birth on November 30, 1931, in Kenya, and his education in Kenya, Uganda and Cambridge where he received his doctorate in 1963. Mbiti was ordained a minister in the Anglican Church and taught theology and religion for many years at Makerere University in Uganda and many other universities as visiting lecturer. He served as director of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Bossy in Geneva, Switzerland. In the over 400 published articles, reviews, and books on theology, religion, philosophy, and literature, Africa remained the focus of his academic scholarship. He became the first African to translate the Bible into his native language, Kamba. Mbiti challenged the Christian view that traditional African religious ideas were “demonic and anti-Christian.” He exposed the biases and insufficiency of the nomenclatures of western theological categories in the evaluation of the theology of ATR that described it as “fetish”, “primitive”, “polytheistic” at best anti-Christian, and at worst practiced by savages. His main ideas which are contained in a seminal monograph, “African Religions and Philosophy”,¹⁸ contended among other important religious and theological issues that African religions are as legitimate, as Christianity and therefore deserved the same respect as Christianity. Mbiti went on to argue for the reassessment and evaluation of the age-old Afro-pessimistic prejudice and scorn of Western hegemonic religious and theological nomenclatures against ATR, African values, culture, and traditions.

In his articles “Concepts of God in Africa”¹⁹ and “encounter of Christian faith and African Religion.”²⁰ Mbiti argued 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. In his work, “Biblical basis for present trends in African theology,”²¹ Mbiti underscored the reasons why, Africa, in spite of everything, has emerged as the fastest-growing in the dynamics and trajectories of the southward shift in the centre of gravity of global Christianity and saw it as a sign that Christianity was really becoming the world religion as it was meant to be and therefore required that theology is stretched beyond the horizon of stereotypes, intellectual myopic hegemonic structures, and the comforts of ready-made methodologies and normative nomenclatures of theologizing. For him, 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. Mbiti proposed what he called a “theological pilgrimage” for western theologians into Africa’s wells of religious, theological scholarship and the daily struggle for survival. Against some western anthropologists, sociologists and even missionaries’ evaluation and assertion that Africans possessed no religion, Mbiti proved that Africans did not only possess an organised religion but also had a notion of the Supreme Being.²²

Nieder-Heitmann,²³ observed that not only was Mbiti successful in his attempt, but he went a step further, proving that Africans had a notion of a “Personal God”, who is known and worshipped under various names, which pointed to his attributes as approachable not only through ancestral

¹⁷ Jonathan, J. Bonk. "The Dictionary of African Christian Biography: A Proposal for Revising Ecclesiastical Maps." *Missiology* 27, no. 1 (1999): 71-83. Note: Francis Anekwe Oborji is a Roman Catholic Priest who lives in Rome where he is professor of Missiology at the Pontifical Urbaniana University

¹⁸ Mbiti. *African religions & Philosophy*.

¹⁹ John S. Mbiti. *Concepts of God in Africa* (Washington; Praeger Publishers, 1970).

²⁰ John S. Mbiti. "The Encounter of Christian faith and African religion." *Christian Century* 97, no. 27 (1980): 817-820.

²¹ John Mbiti. "The Biblical Basis for present trends in African Theology." *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 4, no. 3 (1980): 119-124.

²² Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*.

²³ Jan Hendrik Nieder-Heitmann, "An analysis and evaluation of John S. Mbiti's theological evaluation of African traditional religions." PhD diss., Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 1981.

mediations but also through direct prayers. In his work “The Prayers of African Religion,”²⁴ Mbiti showed that though Africans never produced Prayer Books, nevertheless they had an authentic spirituality. For Mbiti, religion is to the Africans an ontological phenomenon that regarded the question of existence or being. Therefore, for him, and the larger community of Africans he is a part of the notion that “to live is to be caught up in a religious drama”. Mbiti's scholarship made a significant impact. It restored the dignity of ATR and brought it to the status where people sought to enquire more, to engage more critically and authentically the issues ATR raised. Others tried to study it out of repugnance, hoping to return to the African past, others saw it as a threat to Christianity and therefore just condemned it. Finally, it made people raise critical questions about the relationship between Christianity and the African culture and religions which hitherto had either been taken for granted or not been thought through seriously. More importantly, it made people reflect on what it meant to be Black African, at the same time Christian.

Justine Ukpong

In African biblical scholarship, the concept of “Inculturation Hermeneutics” has come to be associated with Justin S. Ukpong, the Nigerian New Testament Scholar. His nearly 20 years of work as a New Testament scholar at the Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, Nigeria, not only established a significant place for African biblical scholarship but also contributed to the formation of numerous contextually committed intellectuals. His biographer Gerald West places his birth on 26 December 1940 in Ikot Essen Oku, Etinan LGA, Akwa, Ibom State, Nigeria. Ukpong strongly believed that Africa can rightly be said to be the cradle of systematic biblical interpretation in Christianity with earliest attempts traceable to the city of Alexandria where names such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and others who lived and worked there featured prominently. Even though Biblical studies in Africa are considered the child of western biblical scholarship, for Ukpong in their use of the tools, biblical scholars in Africa have successfully developed a parallel method of their own.²⁵ The particular characteristic feature of this method is the concern to create an encounter between the biblical text and the African context, which employs a variety of methods that links the biblical text to the African context, such that the main focus of interpretation was the communities that receive the text, rather than those that produced it or on the text itself, as is the case with the western methods.

Ukpong’s Inculturation Hermeneutics is one approach of the two main approaches that emerged i.e., inculturation and liberation in response to widespread condemnation of African religions and culture by Christian missionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries. They regarded African religions as demonic and immoral, and therefore had to be exterminated before Christianity could take root in Africa. In terms of biblical studies, Ukpong argued that the inculturation approach is expressed in two models which he referred to as the Africa-in-the-Bible studies and evaluative studies.²⁶

According to Ukpong, the objective of the first approach was to investigate the presence of Africa and African peoples in the Bible. The significance of such presence is to articulate Africa's influence on the history of ancient Israel and contribution to the history of salvation, as well as to correct negative interpretations of some biblical texts on Africa. In the second approach, Ukpong isolated and outlined five different approaches. The first approach evaluated elements of African culture, religion, beliefs, concepts, or practices in the light of biblical witness, to arrive at a Christian understanding of those elements and to accentuate their value for Christian witness. The second approach is somehow similar to the first approach which is concerned with what a biblical text or theme had to say in critique of particular issues in society or in the church's life, or what lessons may be drawn from a biblical text or theme for a particular context. In the third approach, biblical themes or texts are interpreted against the background of African culture, religion and life experience with the

²⁴ John S. Mbiti. *The Prayers of African Religion*. (London; SPCK, 1975).

²⁵ Justin S. Ukpong. "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa. Historical and Hermeneutical Directions." In *The Bible in Africa*, (London: Brill, 2000),11-28.

²⁶ Justin, S. Ukpong. "Rereading the Bible with African eyes: Inculturation and hermeneutics." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995): 3-3.

aim to arrive at a new understanding of the biblical text that would be informed by the African situation, which will be both African and Christian. The fourth approach was erecting "bridgeheads" for communicating the biblical message. Using concepts from either the Bible or African culture gave credence to the continuity between the African culture and Christianity. The fifth approach was the study of the Bible to point to biblical insights that offered a theological foundation for contemporary practice in church or society. Now convinced about the insufficiency and adequacy of the methods and nomenclatures of biblical scholarship, by the theology of the west alone to provide relevant answers to the kind of questions, African Christians became more informed by their experiences and encounters of the daily lives of the ordinary person. They became persuaded that the Bible has an important contribution to make in the discipline of Biblical Studies, and the power to transform lives. Ukpong thus developed an African approach to engaging with the social-cultural contexts of both ordinary people and the biblical texts. He argued that even though the academic interpretation of the Bible in Africa is a child of western biblical scholarship, Africa had since developed its own approach.²⁷ His work, 'Inculturation Hermeneutics: an African Approach to Biblical Interpretation,'²⁸ displayed what his inculturation methodology was; "a contextual hermeneutic methodology that sought to make any community of people and their social-cultural context the subject of interpretation of the Bible through the use of the conceptual frame of reference of the people and the involvement of the ordinary people in the interpretation process."²⁹

For Ukpong, the meaning of a text was a function of the interaction between the text in its context and the reader in their context. This was particularly relevant because it gave particular attention to culture. The Bible is therefore, decolonised and read within the general and specific religious, economic, social, and political contexts of the African culture. Ukpong succeeded in deriving a representation of a coherent philosophical worldview from the African indigenous traditions, culture, and religions. In his work, "Models and Methods of Biblical Interpretation in Africa,"³⁰ he articulated a view of indigenous African praxis different from that of the West. Notwithstanding, his main objective was never to simply develop an ethnophilosophical scholarship but to emphasize the wealth of knowledge in African traditions, culture, and values that are to be considered relevant in theological discourse. In "Rereading the Bible with African eyes: Inculturation and hermeneutics,"³¹ Ukpong emphasised the need to consider the critical role of 'contexts' when interpreting biblical texts. In his proposition, the past (context) of a biblical text does not have to be considered as 'an end in itself', but 'as a means to an end'. The task of interpretation for Ukpong primarily contains bringing the 'text' within its historical-social context to bear on the contexts of the present-day readers' To Ukpong, this is an epistemological privilege to the present-day readers.

The basis of Ukpong's Intercultural Hermeneutics and for many of his inculturation theology, the following were clearly outlined; First, inculturation hermeneutics should highlight the significant role of the Bible reader's context in the hermeneutical endeavours. This means that, if possible, the African social-cultural context should be intentionally made the subject in the interpretive endeavours. In Ukpong's view, epistemological privilege is to be accorded to the readers. Second, the Bible remains a critical resource in inculturation hermeneutics. The text of the Bible has a message for present-day Bible readers. It has the capacity to affect not only personal transformation in the lives of African Christians but also societal transformation. Third, according to Ukpong, exegesis and hermeneutics are not to be seen as separate entities. In Ukpong's opinion, exegesis is not to be done for its own sake. The past of the biblical text is studied with a view to seeing the kind of light it might throw to the present-day ordinary people's contexts. A reader who is critically aware of a contemporary context

²⁷ Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa. Historical and Hermeneutical Directions." 11-28.

²⁸ Justin, S. Ukpong. "Inculturation hermeneutics: An African approach to biblical interpretation." *The Bible in a world context: An experiment in contextual hermeneutics* (2002): 17-32.

²⁹ Ukpong, "Inculturation hermeneutics: An African approach to biblical interpretation." 17-32.

³⁰ Justin S. Ukpong. "Models and Methods of Biblical Interpretation in Africa." *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 55, no. 4 (1999): 279-295.

³¹ Justin S. Ukpong "Rereading the Bible with African eyes: Inculturation and hermeneutics." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995): 3-3.

enters the text whose context he/she is aware of, allowing the text to evoke appropriate responses, reactions and commitments in the readers' context.

Kwame Bediako

Manasseh Kwame Dakwa Bediako, rector Akrofi-Christaller Institute for Theology, Mission, and Culture, became popularly known as Kwame Bediako. He presented a non-Western basis for theological reflection, which expanded the Christian theological imagination, and offered a path forward for post-Christendom theologies. His biographer Andrew F. Walls places his date of birth on July 7, 1945. He had his education in Ghana and the University of Bordeaux for his masters and doctoral degrees. He gained a second doctorate degree from the University of Aberdeen, under Andrew Walls. In his later life, Bediako became known primarily for his works in African Christian theology. For many years Bediako pointed others to Africa's proper place in contemporary worldwide Christian discourse. He chartered new directions for African Christian theology. He laboured so that generations of scholars, confident equally of their Christian and African identity, might be formed in Africa, and to that end, he created a new type of institution where devotion to scholarship and understanding of the cultures of Africa would be pursued in a setting of Christian worship, discipleship, and mission. His work "Theology and Identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and in modern Africa,"³² engaged his main concerns with identity, precisely what it meant to be African and Christian after the failures of colonialism. He also emphasised the relationship between theology and culture, and the need for indigenous expressions of Christian faith for theological reflection worldwide.

Bediako highlighted the importance of the identity question for the African church. While he focused on the contrast between African theology and that of the early church, in his assessment, the issues were not identical; there was a distinction as well. The contemporary African Christian identity problem derived not just from conversion to Christianity from ATR but also from the whole impact of the West on Africa. This, he argues, began well before the arrival of missionaries, particularly with the slave trade which shaped negative European attitudes to and stereotypes of Africa. Furthermore, Bediako maintained that the lack of serious encounters with ATR was the result of its condemnation and misrepresentation by the missionaries. This disengaged African believers from their religious heritage and so denied them a truly African theology by not allowing a 'heathen' memory in the African Christian consciousness.

Bediako concludes that the African quest for an authentic Christian identity is unfortunately obstructed by the very missionary enterprise that brought the gospel. Bediako contended that the creation of a distinctively African Christian identity, therefore, depends to a large extent on a positive reevaluation and recovery of the ATR as a precursor of Christianity. In his work "Christianity as a Non-Western Religion,"³³ Bediako maintained that the struggle between gospel and culture, Scripture in African languages and African Traditional Religions, as "*preparatio evangelica*" for the Christian faith enabled Africans to produce "contextual theology" and that Africa could provide an alternative to remake Christian theology.

According to Bediako, the task of remaking theology will ensure the preservation of the integrity of the Christian faith in Africa and make it a non-western religion that is not dictated by the ideals of the west. So, like Sanneh, Ekem and Dickson, Bediako underscored the strategic and important role that the use of "mother tongue" in theology and biblical scholarship can make in the planting and growth of the church. In his works "Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian perspective," and "Jesus and the Gospel in Africa"³⁴ Bediako asked this question, Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that a western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world view, the object of the adoration and prayer of

³² Kwame Bediako, *Theology and identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and in modern Africa*. (Oxford: OCMS, 1992).

³³ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The renewal of a non-Western religion*. Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

³⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian gospel in African history and experience*. (Oxford: OCMS, 2000).

historic Christendom, but if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like? Bediako challenged the stereotypical perceptions of African Christianity and pushed readers to interrogate their own theological convictions in the light of cultural and societal presuppositions.³⁵ Bediako argued that “the ability to hear the gospel in one’s language and express same in response to the gospel lie at the heart of all true encounters of religions with people.”³⁶ Bediako offered the world of non-Western theological scholarship a new paradigm, a fresh hermeneutical key to appreciate the fact that Jesus Christ was not to be seen as alien to the non-Western, pre-Christian traditions but as an ancestor, Jesus, by his life, death and resurrection became an ancestor par excellence, a universal saviour, with whose salvific work Africa could also identify.

His incarnation and ancestor theologies constituted in one sense a lesson in the translatability of faith, making the translations of the Bible important facilitators of the Christian mission in Africa. Bediako emphasised that, the incarnation of Christ is paradigmatic for the translatability of the gospel and that it affirms the universality of the gospel.³⁷ Bediako also raised a fundamental issue concerning the nature of conversion to the Christian faith. In seeing a significant degree of continuity between the pre-Christian and Christian experience of African believers his argument suggests that conversion should be understood more in terms of fulfilment than of antithesis. In other words, by responding to the gospel the new believer is completing or realizing what he or she already knew and worshipped previously in some obscure and misty way: Jesus Christ comes to complete pre-Christian religious experience, not to negate it. He did not understand why Africans could only become authentically Christians only by embracing the culture and mindset of the West while rejecting the traditional and cultural values that made them distinctively Africans. To Bediako, the African context provided such a rich philosophical context for a comprehensive and expanded interpretive methodological framework for reading the Bible. In his view, the Bible is not deaf and dumb to the tangibility of cultural experience and supernatural encounters contained in the African context.³⁸ Such experiences gave a much bigger and deeper theoretical framework within which an encompassing interpretation of a biblical text could be discussed. After all, the historical context from which the Bible is the text of contention is not unfamiliar with the African cultural context.³⁹

Charles Nyamiti

According to his biographer Francis Anekwe Oborji, Charles Nyamiti was born in 1931, one of three brothers and four sisters, to Christian parents, Theophilus Chambi Chambigulu and Helen Nyasolo, who belonged to the Wanyamwezi people of Tanzania. His interest in blending his Christian faith with an African worldview through theological reflection was the result of the cultural socialization his parents gave him growing up surrounded by Wanyamwezi culture and Tanzanian philosophy. After his primary and high school education, Nyamiti studied for the priesthood at the Kipalapala Major Seminary in Tabora, Tanzania, where he acquired his philosophical and theological formation. Ordained a Catholic priest in 1962, Nyamiti went to Louvain University in Belgium from 1963 to 1969, where he obtained his doctorate degree in Systematic/Dogmatic Theology and a certificate in Music Theory and Piano. From Louvain, he went to Vienna, to study Cultural Anthropology and Music Composition, graduating with another doctorate and licentiate respectively. Nyamiti then returned to Tanzania where he served as a professor at his alma mater, Kipalapala Major Seminary, from 1976-1981.

Like Mbiti, Ukpong, and Bediako, Nyamiti’s works reveal his theological methodology to be metaphysical, speculative, systematic, and in some cases, abstract in a deductive sense. Nyamiti’s scholarship was influential in the global recognition of African Christian theology and African

³⁵ Kwame Bediako. "Africa and Christianity on the threshold of the third millennium: the religious dimension." *African Affairs* 99, no. 395 (2000): 303-323.

³⁶ Kwame Bediako, "The doctrine of Christ and the significance of vernacular terminology." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22, no. 3 (1998): 110-112.

³⁷ Bediako, "The doctrine of Christ and the significance of vernacular terminology." 110-112.

³⁸ Bediako, *Jesus and the gospel in Africa: History and experience*.

³⁹ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian gospel in African history and experience*.

Christology. His writings have helped to restore the dignity of African people and to rehabilitate the long-scorned African religious and cultural heritage, making it an indispensable source for authentic African Christian theology among the theological sciences of our time.

Today, it is no longer taboo to discuss or write about African theology and Christology in theological faculties across the globe. His work "African Theology: Its Nature, Problems and Methods" is an African theology of reconstruction. A theology that systematically and scientifically merged the inculturation approach of the liberation theology held onto by orthodoxy but relevant to Africa's context. Although Nyamiti laid out his theological methodology and perspective in several papers, he did so most fully in "Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective."⁴⁰ Nyamiti attributes to Christ the title "Brother-Ancestor." He placed Christ, the brother-Ancestor, at the "biological" level, in this respect, Nyamiti restricted the meaning of the term "ancestor."⁴¹ For him, the most appropriate meaning of the term for theological purposes is the understanding of the ancestor as the immediate parent of given individuals. Within this context, Nyamiti applied the human ancestral relationship (analogically) to the inner life of God (the Trinity) to show that there is a kind of ancestral kinship among the divine persons. Nyamiti used a number of arguments, including his claim that the goal of the activity of Jesus when on earth showed that He can be called our "brother-ancestor". That goal was the restoration of the primordial position which comprised the divine adoptive sonship lost by sin. That is the bridging of the gap incurred by the disobedience of mankind's progenitors (Adam and Eve), and the heavenly Ancestor (the Supreme Being). Nyamiti implied that Christ is a brother-Ancestor because through him and in the divine Spirit, believers have been reconciled with God and made partakers of the Trinitarian life.

For Nyamiti, all supernatural activities i.e., prayer, good works, and reception of the sacraments become the means for deepening human and divine ancestorship for mankind. Just as human descendants have the duty to be in regular contact with their ancestors through prayers and ritual offerings, so also Christians must be in contact with their heavenly Ancestor through religious activities and works that befit Christian existence. The holier a person is, the better ancestor he or she is, whereas a person in the state of sin has lost the basis for divine ancestorship and is badly disposed of for filial relations with his or her ancestors. Furthermore, Nyamiti argued that since ancestors are archetypes of nature and behaviour, as well as sources of tradition, Christians are bound to respect Christian tradition and imitate their heavenly Ancestors. The great model here is Christ himself. In the same vein, in times of need and affliction, Christians should always turn to their divine Ancestor, for ancestors are also helpers and protectors. Christians who limit their efforts to earthly means in a time of difficulty act against African customs and fail to fulfil their ancestral duties to God, who is then entitled to punish their negligence. Finally, Nyamiti contends that, since African ancestors desire as many descendants as possible, it is the duty of filial piety for Christians to try to win as many converts to Christianity as possible.

Evaluation of the scholarship of Mbiti, Ukpong, Bediako, and Nyamiti

There are several scholarships specifically on the evaluation and analysis of the scholarship of Mbiti, Ukpong, Bediako, and Nyamiti and towards the development of an African context for theological and biblical scholarship, even though in recent times what they hypothesised through such austerity has now become the focus of modern Christology and theology and biblical scholarship in Africa. At the beginning of his campaign, Mbiti was not spared criticism, his theology and hypothesis were consistently and systematically condemned. Beidelman refers to it as "a scissors-and-paste list of snippets of different societies jumbled together out of full social context and full of errors."⁴² People

⁴⁰ Charles, Nyamiti. "Christ as our ancestor: Christology from an African perspective." *Mambo occasional papers/Missio-pastoral series* 11 (1984).

⁴¹ Nyamiti. "Christ as our ancestor: Christology from an African perspective."

⁴² Thomas, O. Beidelman, Review on "African religions and philosophy" by Mbiti. *Journal of the International African Institute* 46(4): (1976) 413-414.

like Ray,⁴³ and Shaw⁴⁴ also considered it as “superficial catalogues of illustrations,” accusing him of uncritical use of secondary sources without an attempt to assess their reliability. His characterisation of African religion as a generalised system is also accused of over-generalisation of various African beliefs into a single unified system. Finally, in his study of the African concepts of God, Mbiti is accused of trying to address nearly every aspect of the African Supreme Being. Because of his desire to deal with every feature of religious phenomena, Mbiti is said to have gathered bits and pieces from different societies and categorises them into a set of "doctrines", which are analogous in structure to Western faith, without recognising the sociocultural and ritual fabric within which they are embedded.

Ukpong and Nyamiti who also try to argue for an inculturation approach to biblical study and interpretation by employing certain contextual methodological frameworks and theories have not also been spared the criticisms. They were criticised for using unorthodox frameworks for Christological and theological discourses. Although they were accused of being geo-theological, their pioneer scholarships have contributed hugely to the current status of respect and dignity for the African context in academic discourses. Like every pioneer's work, it is true that in certain places and in selected areas of the development of their arguments these scholars were not able to articulate or construct their arguments well. Thus, hind knowledge has allowed evaluation of their positions. This means that it's not more right to condemn those positions but expedient to add on to their contribution, what is learned from their pioneering work and what contribution can be added to it. In as much as their scope of literature reviews might have been limited, the availability of technology and science brings unlimited cooked literature from which one can submit a systematic and logical argument to fill the gaps in their scholarship. These observations aside, it is acknowledged that the existence of many other critiques cannot be discussed in their entirety in this one piece of study. In the sequel to this, the authors are hopeful to dedicate another study to the critiques in other scholarly and academic materials to bring forth a balance.

CONCLUSION

This particular study has evaluated the contributions of Kwame Bediako, John S. Mbiti, Justin Ukpong and Charles Nyamiti, who amidst austere criticism established a theoretical framework and theological paradigm for the redefinition and contextualization of the African experience and context relevant to the interpretation of the bible and other Christological and theological nomenclatures.

A lot of strides have been made academically to ensure the recognition of the African context as a critical necessity in the search for a more holistic and comprehensive theoretical framework for the analysis and interpretation of the biblical context and its emergence with the African context. These scholars have made such a huge contribution which not only concentrated on methodology but also on theory. They have succeeded in clearly arguing for the particular contribution that the African context presents in the area of philosophy, theology, science, etc. Again, they have been able to explain in more than one way how the African context contributes to existing scholarship on theology and Christology. In the area of philosophy, theology and Christology, these scholars have created a theoretical paradigm and a framework by which the African context is considered and studied as another subject in the study of things. As can be seen from the study of other scholars who have critically evaluated the scholarship of these selected scholars and theologians, they did not claim to present arguments that were supposedly perfect and without errors. In their attempts, they have succeeded in setting the pace for further studies, rhetorics and research into the areas they have made their contribution as pioneers.

⁴³ Benjamin, C Ray. Recent studies of African religions. *History of Religions* 12(1) (1972). 75-89.

⁴⁴ Daniel, R. Shaw. "Traditional" African religions. In: U. King (ed.), *Turning points in Religious Studies: Essays in honour of Geoffrey Parrinder* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 1990. 181-191.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Rev. Edward Agboada is an Ordained Minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Until recently he was a Senior Lecturer at the Ramseyer Training Centre, (Abetifi) where he taught courses in World Religions, Islamic Studies, Christian-Muslim relations, interfaith dialogue, Cross-Cultural Missions, New Religious Movements, Homiletic (Practice of Preaching), and studies in African Traditional Religions.