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***in Modern Africa***

**Kwame Bediako**

**The Laing Lecture for 1993**

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**MODERN AFRICA AS A HEARTLAND OF  
CHRISTIAN RELIGION**

We may perhaps take it for granted that with the publication of the World Christian Encyclopaedia in 1982, edited by David Barrett,<sup>1</sup> a good number of Christians have now become accustomed to the phenomenon referred to as the modern shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity. The idea is that in our time, the heartlands of the Christian faith are no longer found in the Western world, but in the non-Western world; not in the northern continents, but in the southern continents of Latin America, Asia and particularly, Africa. In 1900, 80% of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America. Today, over 60% of the world's Christians live in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Today, it is reckoned that there are well over 250 million and, by the year 2000, there could be between 330 million and 350 million Christians in Africa. By any account then, Africa has become one of the heartlands of the Christian faith in our time.

In fact, in January 1970, Barrett had an article published with the title, 'AD 2000: 250 million Christians in Africa', in which he argued, on the basis of his demographic projections, that by the end of the century, Africa might well 'tip the balance and transform Christianity permanently, into a primarily non-Western religion'.<sup>2</sup> It seems we may now say that this has happened. Christianity has become a non-Western religion, not only in demographic terms, but in some other respects too. This does not mean that Western Christianity has become irrelevant, but rather that Christianity may now be seen for what it truly is, a universal religion, and that what has taken place in Africa has been a significant part of this process.

I should like to dwell for a little while on this significance of Africa. I do so because there is probably only one word which can truly describe the present status of Christianity in Africa as we approach the new century. That word is: 'surprise'. Surprise, I suggest, in the fact that Africa has become so massively Christian at all.

At the start of this century, in 1910, when the World Missionary Conference met in Edinburgh to consider the 'missionary problems in relation to the non-Christian world', and particularly to seek ways in

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which the Christian Gospel might make a greater impact upon the world's non-Christian religions, it was the primal religions of Africa, roundly called 'Animism'—a description taken

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<sup>1</sup> Nairobi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> D. Barrett, 'AD 2000: 350 million Christians in Africa', *International Review of Mission* 59 (1970), 50.

from a man who was not particularly religious himself and who probably never met any of those to whose religion he gave the term—which caused the most concern. The general feeling was that there was 'practically no religious content in Animism', nor was there in it 'any preparation for Christianity'. In fact, the official report stated: 'If things continue as they are now tending, Africa may become a Mohammedan continent.' No one at that time could have foreseen the emergence of a vibrant Christian presence in Africa, let alone the emergence of a distinctively African experience of Jesus Christ.

### **CHRISTIAN AFRICA: THE SURPRISE-FACTOR IN THE MODERN MISSIONARY STORY**

There is a further twist to this surprise-element in modern Africa's Christian story. When the later important 'Africa' missionary conference met at Le Zoute, Belgium, in September 1926, then it appeared that the missionary movement was now reflecting on, and learning from, its African experience. In fact, the conference which was chaired by Scotsman Dr Donald Fraser, Secretary of the United Free Church of Scotland Foreign Mission Committee and former missionary in Nyasaland (Malawi), was convened precisely because there was a feeling that the Edinburgh 1910 conference had not given adequate attention to Africa. Unlike Edinburgh 1910, which had had no African participant, Le Zoute 1926, though attended by Western missionaries in the majority, nonetheless included African Christian leaders representing their churches and mission communities.

On the question whether there did exist any 'preparation for Christianity' in the African religious past, Le Zoute struck a quite different note from Edinburgh, by affirming that 'it has now become recognised that Africans have been prepared by previous experience for the reception of the Gospel and that their experience contains elements of high religious value'.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps more significantly, the conference also expressed unease regarding the calibre of the missionary personnel being sent to Africa, and their capacity for sustained impact. This led the conference to declare, as follows:

Surely the day has gone when the best men could be picked out for India and China and the rest sent to Africa, as if any man or woman were good enough for Africa. The time for amateurs has passed—if it ever existed. Nothing is too good for Africa.<sup>4</sup>

The Conference even passed resolutions on the subject, recommending to mission boards, committees and agencies that they 'provide full

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opportunity and time to African missionaries, by means of recognised courses at home or on the field, to study native languages, customs and religion, that they may make an effective approach to the African mind'.<sup>5</sup>

Valuable and important as these declarations at Le Zoute were, they are not as central to the story of African Christianity in the 20th century as they may sound. By the early decades of

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<sup>3</sup> E.W. Smith (ed.), *The Christian Mission in Africa: A study based on the work of the international conference at Le Zoute, Belgium, September, 14-21, 1926* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1926), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *The Christian Mission in Africa*, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *The Christian Mission in Africa*, 46.

the century, the missionary movement had unleashed forces which would lead to a major Christian breakthrough on the continent, but it was a breakthrough which Western missionaries on the whole did not see because they did not expect it. Furthermore, the foundations for this breakthrough had been laid, in fact, by some of those 'amateurs', men of 'humble background and modest attainments'. These ones, as Andrew Walls has shown in a most illuminating study on the subject, 'would not have been considered for ordination at home' and yet 'in order to reach the mission field, or in order to be more effective there, set themselves to intellectual effort and acquired learning and skills far beyond anything which would have been required of them in their ordinary run of life'.<sup>6</sup> Such a one was Robert Moffat (of Bechuanaland) who had been an Englishman's gardener in Cheshire before he became 'one of God's gardeners', as Edwin Smith called him in his biography. When Moffat experienced a spiritual awakening as a result of his association with Methodists, and subsequently felt the, initial stirrings of a missionary vocation, his first thought was: 'I have never been to college; no missionary society will accept me.'

Another was Johannes Christaller (of the Gold Coast, now Ghana), son of a tailor and a baker's daughter; on returning to his native Germany after a distinguished missionary career, he would not be awarded an honorary doctorate by the Theology Faculty of Tübingen because he had no university degree. Yet this is the missionary of whose work Dr. Noel Smith wrote in his doctoral thesis for Edinburgh University:

Christaller's work achieved three things: it raised the Twi language to a literary level and provided the basis of all later work in the language; it gave the first real insight into Akan religious, social and moral ideas; and it welded the expression of Akan Christian worship to the native tongue.<sup>7</sup>

Scotland did better for Moffat; Edinburgh University awarded him a Doctor of Divinity!

There is therefore a further sense yet in which the emergence of Christian Africa in the 20th century was to be a surprise-story of the modern missionary movement. By its deep and early vernacular achievement, that is, relative to Europe's own missionary past, the modern missionary movement had actually ensured that Africans had

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the means to make their own responses to the Christian message, and in terms of their own needs and categories of meaning. Already as from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, through a variety of factors, including frustration with European missionary paternalism and control, Africans had set about establishing what came to be called African Independent Churches (or African Instituted Churches, in some of the more recent literature). Many of the earlier investigations of this phenomenon tended to focus on the sociological and political causes which saw them essentially, if not even exclusively, as protest movements; rarely were religious and properly Christian factors taken seriously into account. Only later did it become more widely acknowledged that the Christian Gospel in Africa had in fact 'had a liberating effect, setting man free, free from fear, fear of witches and the power of darkness, but above

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<sup>6</sup> A.F. Walls, 'The Missionary Vocation and the Ministry: The First Generation', M. Glasswell and E. Fashole-Luke (eds.), *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World* (London: SPCK, 1974), 153.

<sup>7</sup> N. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1965), 55.

all conferring a freedom from an inner dependence on European tokens of grace or favour, to aim for higher things and a finer sensitivity'.<sup>8</sup>

In that last statement I have quoted the words of one of the ablest and most sensitive of European interpreters of African Christianity, Swedish Lutheran Bishop Bengt Sundkler, in his book *Zulu Zion and some Swazi Zionists*. And part of the process which I am referring to as the eventual realisation of the surprise-element in the story of Christian Africa, I suggest, is reflected in the difference between his first pioneer study on the Independent Churches, *Bantu Prophets of South Africa* (1948)<sup>9</sup> and the later *Zulu Zion* (1976). Having concluded in the earlier book that these 'syncretistic sects', as he called them, were 'the bridge over which Africans are brought back to heathenism', he later acknowledged a mistake in his previous interpretation. In 1976 he wrote:

From the point of view of those involved, Zion was not turned to the past, but to the future and was their future.

I commend the study of the two books together to anyone interested in following up this subject.

We could consider the careers of William Wade Harris, John Swatson, Sampson Oppong, Joseph Babalola, Garrick Braide, in West Africa; of Joseph Kimbangu in Congo/Zaire; of Isaiah Shembe in Southern Africa, and several other dynamic African prophetic figures across the continent, a good number of whom were women. None of them were commissioned by a missionary society, yet their ministries contributed significantly to the growth of mission churches, and all appeared in the same general period when the Le Zoute conference was lamenting missionary failures. All of this is sufficient indication that the making of Christian Africa in the 20th century has been 'to a surprising extent the result of African initiatives'.<sup>10</sup>

As Andrew Walls has noted:

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There is something symbolic in the fact that the first church in tropical Africa in modern times was not a missionary creation at all. It arrived readymade, a body of people of African birth or descent who had come to faith in Christ as plantation slaves or as soldiers in the British army during the American War of Independence, or as farmers or squatters in Nova Scotia after it.<sup>11</sup>

This was the first church in Sierra Leone, arriving there in 1792, the year of William Carey's *Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, urging British Christians to do something about getting the Gospel to non-Christians elsewhere in the world. Carey looked forward to the emergence of theologians, great Christian thinkers, 'able divines' from among the 'heathens'. And yet the general expectation was that it was the non-Christian monotheists, Jews and Muslims, then the 'civilised pagans', Hindus and Buddhists, in that order, who would lead the way. As far as 'barbarous and uncivilised

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<sup>8</sup> B. Sundkler, *Zulu Zion and some Swazi Zionists* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 318f.

<sup>9</sup> London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>10</sup> A.F. Walls, 'The Significance of Christianity in Africa' (The St. Colm's Lecture, 1989, Edinburgh, unpublished), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Walls, 'The Significance of Christianity in Africa', 5.

heathens', that is, the Animists, were concerned, it was presumed they had more ground to cover. It was never conceived that heathen 'animistic' Africans would be among those who would make the most significant response to the Gospel message. The recognition that the forms of the religious life associated with animism, namely, the primal religions of the world, have in fact been the religious background of the majority of Christians everywhere, including the Christians of Europe, throughout Christian history, still lay in the future.<sup>12</sup>

### AFRICA AND THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY

In our time, too, there has been much allusion to the marginalisation of Africa, following the end of the Cold War era, and in the expectation that Africa will hold a less strategic place in a world no longer dominated by the ideological rivalries between East and West, between capitalism and communism. However, it could be argued that in one particular respect, Africa will not be marginalised. That one area is the field of Christian theology and Christian religious scholarship generally.

I do not wish to make exaggerated claims for the African evidence; the present shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity to the non-Western world involves more than Africa. The whole of the non-Western world is important in the present phase of the cultural history of the Christian faith. Each context of the manifestation of Christianity in the non-Western world gives access to valuable insights and important lessons regarding Christian presence in the world, as 'Christian theology is taken into new areas of life, where Western theology has no answers, because it has no questions', as Andrew Walls has recently noted.<sup>13</sup>

However, it can be argued that the African Christian field, not least

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because of its surprise-element and its vibrancy, offers quite distinctive opportunities for fresh Christian theological reflection and for new understandings, for example, as to how the Gospel engages with culture. The essential point was made by Harold Turner in an article in a volume of essays in honour of the late Harry Sawyer of Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, and published as *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World*. In his article, Turner sought to show that in all the regular religious disciplines—Biblical Studies, Christian History, Missiology and Ecumenics, Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics, as well as in the general phenomenology and history of religion—the African field threw new light on old issues, because it yielded *data* which were both vital and contemporary. Turner stated quite clearly the basis upon which he was commending the serious study of African Christianity, and I would like to quote him fully here:

Theology as a science depends upon access to its appropriate *data* in their most authentic and vital forms. If we regard the data of theology as being the revelations and acts of the Divine, the postbiblical and contemporary manifestations of these *data* will occur less vividly in a dispirited Western Church with declining numbers and morale. On the other hand, the *data* will be more evident and accessible in unsophisticated churches where the living God is taken seriously as present in the healing and conquering power of the Spirit,

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<sup>12</sup> See H. W. Turner, 'The Primal Religions of the World and Their Study', *Victor Hayes (ed.), Australian Essays in World Religions* (Bedford Park, 1977), 27-37.

<sup>13</sup> A.F. Walls, 'Structural Problems in Mission Studies', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 15, 4 (1991), 147f.

with a gospel-generated growth and a spiritual creativity and confidence. Here at the growing edges of Christianity in its most dynamic forms, the theologian is encouraged to do scientific theology again, because he has a whole living range of contemporary data on which to work. It is not that these dynamic areas of the Christian world are free from imperfection; but being full of old and new heresies, they need theology and offer it an important task.<sup>14</sup>

I have quoted Turner at some length to show that he was neither uncritical nor naive regarding the African field he was commending; and I hope the same can be said about my own approach.

### **'JESUS OF THE DEEP FOREST': THEOLOGY FROM WHERE WE MUST LIVE**

It is not my intention to pursue the argument about Africa's significance beyond this point. Instead, what I propose to do is to present the evidence of a theological articulation within Ghanaian Christianity (though I believe it exists elsewhere in Africa also), one which is rarely mentioned in the usual discussions about African theology, but which I consider important for our understanding of what has happened and is

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happening in the life of many Christian communities in Africa. It is the kind of evidence which helps to show how one is able to speak of the Christian faith itself as having become a non-Western religion. It is the evidence of what I call a 'grassroots' theology; some will call it an oral theology, or even, a spontaneous or 'implicit theology'.<sup>15</sup>

Yet it is in its own way, also a reflective theology. So here we go:

Jesus is the grinding stone  
on which we sharpen our cutlasses,  
before we perform manly deeds.  
We have risen at dawn  
to take up our weapons of war,  
and join the battle.  
*Nkrante brafo*, You are the Sword Carrier  
*Okatakyi Birempon*: Hero Incomparable  
by the time we reach the edge of the battle  
the war has already ended.  
We turn back, singing praises.

If you go with Jesus to war,  
no need for a sword or gun.  
The word of his mouth is the weapon  
which makes enemies turn and run.

If we walk with Him and we meet with trouble  
we are not afraid.

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<sup>14</sup> H.W. Turner, 'The Contribution of Studies on Religion in Africa to Western Religious Studies', M. Glasswell and E. Fashole-Luke (eds.), *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World* (London: SPCK, 1974), 177f.

<sup>15</sup> A. Hastings, *African Christianity: An Essay in Interpretation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), 54.

Should the devil himself become a lion  
and chase us as his prey,  
we shall have no fear Lamb of God!  
Satan says he is a wolf—  
Jesus stretches forth his hand,  
and look: Satan is a mouse!  
Holy One!<sup>16</sup>

So runs a portion of the spontaneous adoration of Jesus by an illiterate Ghanaian Christian woman, Christina Afua Gyan, better known as Afua Kuma, a native of the forest town of Obo-Kwahu on the Kwahu mountain ridge in the Eastern Region of Ghana. There she lived, farmed and also practised as a traditional midwife. Her prayers and praises of Jesus are, of course, in her mother-tongue, the Akan language. But they have been faithfully translated into English by Fr. Jon Kirby, to give the reader a good indication of their depth of Christian experience conveyed in the thought-forms and categories of the Akan world view in her rural setting.

Since these texts were first published in 1981, the Akan version;

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*Kwaebirentuw ase Iesu*, has been regularly sold out, far ahead of the English translation, *Jesus of the Deep Forest*. It is obvious that the publication of these Christian prayers and praises of an illiterate woman reflecting an Akan experience of life in Christ, has had an impact among literate Ghanaian Christians.

So, what is this illiterate Christian woman's place in African theology? Here, I believe, is an illustration of that spirituality which gives a clue to the vibrant Christian presence that we know of, and which forms the true basis of African theology; and which also provides clear evidence that Christianity in Africa is a truly African experience. As Adrian Hastings once noted:

It is in the experience of vernacular prayer, both public and private, both formal and informal and in the spirituality which grows up from such experience that the true roots for an authentic African Christianity will most surely be found.<sup>17</sup>

For this is theology which comes from where faith lives and must live continually, in the conditions of life of the community of faith, the theology of the living Church, reflecting faith in the living Lord as present reality in daily life.

What is also immediately striking about Madam Afua Kuma's prayers and praises is how intensely they reflect a well-known and important feature of African primal religion, namely, a keen sense of nature, almost a 'fellow-feeling with nature', as Professor Kwesi Dickson of Ghana has called it. While acknowledging that 'this fellow-felling is of course much less in evidence in the urban areas of Africa than in the rural', Dickson still comments:

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<sup>16</sup> *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma* (Accra: Asewmpa Publishers, 1981; English translation of original Twi texts), 17f.

<sup>17</sup> Hastings, *African Christianity: An Essay in Interpretation*, 49.



Generally speaking... the environment has a special meaning for the African; he loves the environment, he fears it, and he senses something mysterious about it. The elements, plants and animals, the land and all that is within and on it-these play a vital role in the African's apprehension of reality.<sup>18</sup>

In this setting of ubiquitous forces and mysterious powers, the Christian who has understood that Jesus Christ is a living reality, can be at home, assured in the faith that Jesus alone is Lord, Protector, Provider and Enabler. In the struggles and battles of life, the Christian discovers that Jesus goes ahead, and that, as *Okatakyi Birempon*, he alone is capable of fighting, conquering, and leading his people in triumph. Satan may transform himself into a lion (*gyata*), or may equally become a wolf (*pataku*). These are no idle metaphors; in the world where 'the unseen powers are held to be active also in the natural order',<sup>19</sup> a hunter or a farmer attacked by a wild beast may well consider that some spiritual agency or other is at work. And the Christian who has become conscious of spiritual warfare through reading the New Testament (e.g. Eph.

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6:10-20), needs no further demonstration of demonic activity. Jesus alone, the Holy One, is able to overcome the evil one, reducing him to a 'mouse', so that 'we shall have no fear'.

Jesus blockades the road of death  
with wisdom and power.  
He, the sharpest of all great swords  
has made the forest safe for the hunters.  
The *mmoatia* he has cut to pieces;  
he has caught *Sasabonsam*  
and twisted off its head.<sup>20</sup>

*Mmoatia* are supposed to be mysterious creatures with superhuman powers, and dwelling deep in the forest; they are believed to be tiny, with feet that point backwards; suspending themselves from trees, they wait for the unwary hunter in the pitch darkness of the night. At their head, as their head-spirit, is *Sasabonsam* with bloodshot eyes. His name has found its way in Akan Christian vocabulary to designate the devil. In the intensely concrete language of the Akan, 'Jesus has twisted off its head'.

He is the Hunter gone to the deep forest  
*Sasabonsam*, the evil spirit  
has troubled hunters for many years.  
They ran in fear,  
leaving their guns behind.  
Jesus has found those same guns,  
and brought them to the hunters  
to go and kill the elephant.  
Truly Jesus is a Man among men,  
the most stalwart of men  
He stands firm as a rock.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> K. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), 48f.

<sup>19</sup> Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> *Jesus of the Deep Forest*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

In this remarkable association of ideas, the one who has made the forest safe for the hunters is himself seen to have become a Hunter too, in order to deliver his fellows; and in this striking association of images, the Incarnation and the victory of the Cross are brought together and made meaningful in the defeat of the terrors of the African world, in both the invisible realm of *Sasabonsam* and his *mmoatia*, and in the visible realm of wild creatures like the elephant which, in rural Ghana can suddenly attack a village and take away a child.

But this celebration of Jesus knows also a sense of history: 'Sasabonsam the evil spirit has troubled hunters for many years.' But Jesus has now appeared, and is acknowledged where he was not known previously; and his defeat of *Sasabonsam*, while it is a living and abiding reality, nevertheless was a definite event in the past, but which now lives on in the local memory. So intense is this new consciousness of God in

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Jesus Christ that it makes all previous knowledge of God pale into insignificance:

Our ancestors did not know *Onyankopon*, the Great God  
they served lesser gods and spirits and became tired.  
But as for us, we have seen holy men and prophets.  
We have gone to tell the angels  
how Jehovah helped us reach this place.  
Jehovah has helped us come this far;  
With gratitude we come before Jesus,  
the One who gives everlasting life.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus Christ, in bestowing everlasting life and this new knowledge of God, has also inaugurated a new era and constituted a new people, his people, bringing them into his Jerusalem, into his Zion, a Zion which is near at hand, and a place of security:

The mountains of Jerusalem surround us  
We are in the midst  
of the mountains of Zion.  
Satan, your bullets can't touch us.  
If Satan says he will rise up against us  
we are still the people of Jesus.  
If Satan troubles us, Jesus Christ,  
You who are the Lion of the grasslands,  
You whose claws are sharp,  
will tear out his entrails  
and leave them on the ground for the flies to eat.<sup>23</sup>

But the 'Jesus of the deep forest' is also the Jesus of the Gospels, the miracle-worker who does the impossible, who triumphs over the obstacles of nature, who provides food for the hungry and water for the thirsty, who delivers from all manner of ailments, and who bestows the wholeness of salvation.

Wonderworker, you are the one

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 46.

who has carried water in a basket  
and put it by the road side  
for the travellers to drink for three days.  
You use the basket to carry water to the desert,  
then you throw in your net and bring forth fish!  
You use the net to fetch water and put it into a basket.  
We ride in canoes on the water's surface and catch our fish!

What is impossible for us is possible with him:

You weave the streams like plaited hair;  
with fountains you tie a knot.<sup>24</sup>

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Magician who walks on the sea:  
He arrives at the middle,  
plunges His hand into the deep and takes out a whale!<sup>25</sup>

Jesus reverses the terrors that threaten our lives; above all, the terror of death, 'so that we may be happy':

*Tutugyagu*: the Fearless One [lit. unafraid of fire, firekiller]  
You have pulled the teeth of the viper,  
and there it lies  
immovable as a fallen tree, on which children play!  
*Adubasapon*: Strong-armed One [lit. ten arms rolled into one]  
You are the one who has tied death to a tree  
So that we may be happy.  
Just as you have done in the days of old  
today you continue to work your wonders!<sup>26</sup>

So the Jesus of the Gospel stories continues to manifest himself today, disclosing his power in the midst of the threatening conditions of existence, the images that describe these reversals taking on, sometimes, an uncannily startling quality:

You have put eggs at the lair of the egg-eating snake.  
We went to look and the snake was lying dead!  
You have left small chicks at the hawk's nest  
And the hawk has fled, leaving the chicks behind.<sup>27</sup>

This all-powerful Jesus who engages in marvellous deeds is also:

Jesus, Saviour of the poor,  
who brightens our faces!  
*Damfo-Adu* [lit. Great Friend, Dependable Friend]  
we rely on you as the tongue relies on the mouth.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

As dependable friend, Jesus ensures our wholesome growth:

The Great Rock we hide behind;  
the great forest canopy that gives cool shade;  
the Big Tree which lifts its vines to peep at the heavens,  
the magnificent Tree whose dripping leaves  
encourage the luxuriant growth below.<sup>29</sup>

Afua Kuma, as a midwife in rural Ghana, must have experienced the presence and power of Jesus in the course of the delivery of many babies:

When you heed the things of God,  
you need not wear an amulet  
to make your marriage fruitful.  
A woman is struggling with a difficult labour,

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and suddenly all is well.  
The child, placenta and all, comes forth  
without an operation. He is the Great Doctor.<sup>30</sup>

Jesus provides sustenance and meets the physical needs of his people; the provision that Jesus gives is depicted in a most delightful image, as an invitation to share in his resources:

You have spread your cloth  
on the sea to dry;  
a cloth for us to wear.<sup>31</sup>

And, as if an echo of the post-resurrection breakfast by Lake Tiberias in John 21:

You boiled your food in the stream  
and when it was cooked  
you poured some out for us to eat.  
You use a needle to dig a wild yam.  
You feed the army of the land  
for three days,  
and still some is left over.<sup>32</sup>

And the Jesus who provides so lavishly is also the one who breaks down barriers between people, transforming 'enemies' into brothers and sisters, as he gives freely to all:

The famine has become severe, let us go and tell Jesus!  
He is the one who,  
when He raises His hands,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 15.

gives even our enemies their share,  
and our brothers bring head-pans  
to carry the food away.<sup>33</sup>

So, he is the Lord and Saviour of all the nations, even though this truth is expressed in details relating to the landscape of the Kwahu mountain ridge of eastern Ghana:

O great and powerful Jesus, incomparable Diviner,  
the sun and moon are Your *batakari* [robe]  
it sparkles like the morning star.  
*Sekyere Buruku*, the tall mountain,  
all the nations see Your glory.<sup>34</sup>

*Sekyere Buruku* recalls a local deity associated with a prominent rocky hill in the Kwahu region. Most mornings from the town of Abetifi, the

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highest inhabited point in Ghana, it can be seen, erect and stately above the clouds on the mountain ridge; and here, from the 'power' of a local deity, we make an easy transition to the glory and power of the true Lord of the land, who has come into his realm.

*Amansanhene*: King of the nations  
He who brings nations together  
milk and honey flow in His veins.<sup>35</sup>

And all classes and groups of people find their longings met in him:

Children rush to meet Him  
crowds of young people  
rush about to make Him welcome.  
Chief of young women:  
they have strung a necklace of gold nuggets and beads  
and hung it around Your neck  
so we go before You,  
shouting Your praises, *ose, ose*,  
Chief of young men:  
they are covered with precious beads  
and gold pendants worn by princes.  
They follow You, playing musical instruments.  
Chief of all strong men: *Owesekramofohene* [lit. king of the  
valiant]  
You have placed Your royal sword in our right hand  
and the flag of victory in our left hand  
while we lead You firing canons.  
Chief of all chiefs  
he says the chiefs are the wise men of the land  
and let his judgment stand.  
The one who lays his worries there

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 23.

and says, 'Lord, judge for me'  
is the only one that God can help;  
God's wisdom sets him free.<sup>36</sup>

In this text we have a picture of the Akan king, who, in traditional society, sits on the throne of the ancestors, receiving the homage of all his subjects at a high point of the year, as at the annual New Year Odwira Festival. But here the King is Jesus, the Chief of all chiefs. And yet the social and political relationships which sustain the community are not taken away, for the regular chiefs are in place—the 'wise men of the land'—and they give judgment; but their verdict is his judgment; for now the chief sits not on the throne of the ancestors to give judgment in their name; Jesus Himself is King and from the unseen realm, it is God's word and God's wisdom that set the accused free.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in these prayers and praises of

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Jesus, all his honorific titles are such as were and are traditionally ascribed to the human sacral ruler: *Tutugyagu*—the Intrepid One; *Okokoduruf*—the Valiant One; *Okokurokohene*—Powerful Chief, Supreme King. Names like *Gyasehene* (Head of the Treasury) and *Adontenhene* (Field Marshall) are actually present-day royal titles for divisional kings under the great king (*Omanhene*). By giving such ancestral and royal titles to Jesus, these prayers and praises indicate how deeply Madam Afua Kuma has apprehended the all-pervasive Lordship of Jesus, both in the ancestral realm of spirit power, and in the realm of the living community under the reigning kings. It is also a measure of how close the biblical world is felt to be to the African world, that biblical realities sometimes take on an immediacy which is quite remarkable:

Jesus! we have taken You out  
and nailed You to a cross.  
On a cross we have nailed You.  
The cross is Your fishing net;  
You cast it in the stream and catch men.  
The cross is the bridge we cross over  
to search for the well of His blood.  
The blood-pool is there.

If it were not for the cross  
we would never have the chance to wash in that blood;  
the cross is the Christian's precious inheritance;  
it brings us to eternal life.<sup>37</sup>

And so the powers of the biblical world can also be experienced here and now, in the uncertainties of modern African politics:

If you are in trouble with the government  
you go and tell Jesus.  
When you reach the court  
they will say

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-25.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 35f.

'Go back home!  
No one will question you;  
you won't have to say a word.'<sup>38</sup>

One could go on listening to Madam Afua Kuma praying to and praising Jesus, but as she herself says:

If we would speak of his wonderful deeds  
we would go on until daybreak.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps what is required is a full exposition of the theology (or christology) of these texts, something that cannot be done within a single paper. But there can be little doubt that the christology of these

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texts is very elevated, and that it stands as a significant illustration of an African response to Jesus which bears the stamp of an authentic African Christian religious experience and meditation.

### **AFRICAN THEOLOGY: THE QUEST AND THE DISCOVERY**

At the beginning of this paper, I made reference to the surprise-element in the African Christian story of this century, surprise, that is, to its early Western interpreters. But the surprise would apply equally, in my view, to some of its later African interpreters. How else may we account for the curious fact that when the 'quest for an African theology' was launched by Africa's academic theologians in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there seemed hardly any awareness that there actually did exist an African theology 'at the grassroots', the result of a truly profound African sense of Jesus Christ as living reality in the African world-reality experienced at the specific level of religious apprehension?

Bolaji Idowu of Nigeria, the *doyen* of West African academic theologians in the 1960s, wrote, in frustration, that whatever theology the African Church had was 'a prefabricated theology, a book theology... what she reads in books written by European theologians, or what she is told by Europeans'.<sup>40</sup> John Mbiti, from Kenya, perhaps the best known African theologian of his generation, went even further, suggesting that 'mission Christianity' had produced a Church 'trying to exist without a theology'<sup>41</sup> and 'without theological consciousness and concern'.<sup>42</sup> Under constant flogging from a critical European public impatient with Africa, because largely without understanding of the continent, these and other pioneers of African theology saw it as their task to construct the prescribed theology. And yet in actual African Christian life, where the faith had to live, a deep apprehension of Jesus Christ had laid the foundations for an African theology, one which, on discovery, can be seen to be the only really valid basis for a tradition of academic theology.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>40</sup> E.B. Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 22f.

<sup>41</sup> J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 232.

<sup>42</sup> J. Mbiti, 'Some African Concepts of Christology', Georg F. Vicedom (ed.), *Christ and the Younger Churches* (London: SPCK, 1972), 51.

The clue to what had happened must lie not so much in the African genius in religion, as surely in the nature of the Christian Faith itself; in the 'infinite cultural translatability' of the Gospel, as Andrew Walls has described it.<sup>43</sup> Unlike, say in Islam, where the word of Allah is fully heard only through the medium of Arabic, in Christianity, the perception of the word of God is achieved in our own mother-tongues (cf. Acts 2:11). And here, it is to the credit of the modern missionary movement from the West that, in contrast to the mission to Europe in earlier times, the history of modern mission could be written, equally, as the history of Scripture translation.

In Africa, the continent of language and languages, the significance of this has been far-reaching. As Lamin Sanneh has graphically put it, the import of Scripture translation and its priority in missionary work is an

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indication that 'God was not disdainful of Africans as to be incommunicable in their languages'.<sup>44</sup> This, Sanneh goes on, not only 'imbued African cultures with eternal significance and endowed African languages with a transcendent range', it also 'presumed that the God of the Bible had preceded the missionary into the receptor-culture'. As, through the very process of Scripture translation, 'the central categories of Christian theology—God, Jesus Christ, creation, history—are transposed into their local equivalents, suggesting that Christianity had been adequately anticipated', they create, in indigenous languages, resonances far beyond what the missionary transmission conceived.<sup>45</sup> The centrality of Scripture translation points to the significance of African pre-Christian religious cultures, not only as a valid carriage for the divine revelation, but also as providing the idiom for Christian apprehension, as anyone who knows the origins of African Christian names for God will understand. In contrast, for example, to what had happened in the earlier evangelisation of Europe, in Africa, the God whose name had been hallowed in indigenous languages in the pre-Christian tradition was found to be the God of the Bible, in a way that neither Zeus, nor Jupiter, nor Odin could be. *Onyankopon* is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; Zeus, Jupiter and Odin are not.

The wider implications of all this are enormous for our subject: the relatively early possession of mother-tongue Scriptures meant that many Africans gained access to the original sources of Christian revelation as mediated through African traditional religious terminology and ideas. Through these, Jesus Christ the Lord had shouldered his way into the African religious world, and was to be discovered there by faith, not invented by theology. It is because John Mbiti came to appreciate this fact that, nearly 20 years after his critical comments about the Church in Africa (quoted above), he could write as follows:

The Christian way of life is in Africa to stay, certainly within the foreseeable future, [and] much of the theological activity in Christian Africa is being done as oral theology (in

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<sup>43</sup> A.F. Walls, 'The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture', *Faith and Thought* 108 (1981), 39. The article was reprinted in *Missionalia* 10, 3 (1982), 93-105.

<sup>44</sup> L. Sanneh, 'The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: An African Perspective', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7, 4 (1983), 166.

<sup>45</sup> On this whole subject, see K. Bediako, 'The Missionary Inheritance', R. Keeley (ed.), *Christianity: A World Faith* (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1986); L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), and P. Stine (ed.), *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990).



contrast to written theology) from the living experiences of Christians. It is theology in the open, from the pulpit, in the market-place, in the home as people pray or read and discuss the Scriptures... African Christianity cannot wait for written theology to keep pace with it... Academic theology can only come afterwards and examine the features retrospectively in order to understand them.<sup>46</sup>

### THEOLOGY AS WITNESS

But to speak of oral theology, in these terms, may even be misleading, as though all that we are dealing with is an oral phase, a transition stage,

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on the way to the *academic* or *written* theology, which then becomes the real theology. Furthermore, the special factors which have led to the development of theology as we usually regard it, as essentially an academic discipline and intellectual pursuit, necessarily literary, and a near-philosophical endeavour that requires specialist technical knowledge and skills, could give us the impression that this oral theology is found in only non-literate circles. Instead, we ought to speak positively of oral, spontaneous, implicit or grassroots theology, as theology which comes from where the faith lives, in the life-situation of the community of faith. Accordingly, this 'grassroots' theology is an abiding element of all theology, and therefore one that it is essential for academic theology to be in touch with, to listen to, to share in, and to learn from—but never to replace. Indeed, academic or written theology cannot replace this spontaneous or grassroots theology, because the two are complementary aspects of one reality, and the 'spontaneous' is the foundation of the 'academic'. Without this vital contact with the spontaneous and grassroots theology, academic theology anywhere can become detached from the community of faith and so be not much more than an exclusive conversation carried on among the guild of scholars, and incapable of communicating life in Jesus Christ to others.

However, when the two aspects are working well, then theology acquires its authentic character—as a task, not of scholars alone, but of a community of believers who share in a common context, and who are committed to the missionary task of bringing the Gospel into contact with the questions and issues of their context. Within this understanding of our Christian calling, the special significance of this spontaneous theology is that it becomes a liberating force for the academic theologian, who is thereby delivered from the false burden of having to 'construct a theology' as if by himself or herself. For its part, academic theology has the important role of understanding, clarifying and demonstrating the *universal* and *academic* significance of the grassroots theology in the interest of the wider missionary task of encountering the world with the Gospel.

I believe that African Christian Theology, if it retains and maintains a vital link with the Christian presence in Africa, will be in a position to contribute significantly to shaping the Church for the coming century by recalling for Christian scholarship in our time, the perennial challenge that it is mission and faith in Jesus as Lord which give birth to theology; and therefore, the supreme task of theology is witness: to 'cry Jesus!', so that men and women may know, and respond to, the love that God has for the world, shown in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>46</sup> J. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 229.

But the final word, appropriately, belongs to the inspiring woman-theologian from rural Ghana whose prayers and praises of Jesus remind us that, in the final analysis, the whole of our Christian calling is to worship Jesus the Lord.

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It is not for His miracles  
or wonderful works alone  
that we are following Jesus.  
For in Him is grace and blessing,  
In Him is eternal life, in Him, peace.<sup>47</sup>

For:

He is the One  
who cooks His food in huge palm-oil pots.  
Thousands of people have eaten,  
yet the remnants fill twelve baskets.  
If we leave all this, and go wandering off  
If we leave His great gift, where else shall we go?<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Jesus of the Deep Forest*, 35.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.