Introduction

For most of Jesus’ life, his ministry on the earth was marked with a sense of obscurity. The Gospels tell a story that after Jesus calming the storm in the presence of his disciples, they asked, “Who is this man? That even the winds and waves obey him!” (Matt 8:27). On an occasion where Jesus was anointed by a sinful woman upon whom Jesus pronounced words of forgiveness, the guests at the table exclaimed: “Who is this man, who even forgives sins?” (Lk. 7:49). After beheading John the Baptist, King Herod made a similar statement: “I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?” (Lk. 9:9). Thus the origin, identity, and even the role of Jesus Christ were for most of his earthly ministry obscure to the Christians (disciples), the religious establishment (the Pharisees and Sadducees), and the political elites (King Herod).

On one occasion in the district of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus, very much aware of his obscurity, tossed out a seemingly random but deliberate question regarding people’s perception of himself. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13). What seemed like a random question was a very central Christological question that conversations in global Christian theology have wrestled with ever since. However, the disciples’ response gives hints of the notions of Christ in contemporary Africa. These notions mostly agree on a diversity of Jesus’ role in their various contexts. The disciples responded: “Some say John the Baptist” (representing the Levitical Nazarene order), “others say Elijah” (representing the pre-exilic prophetic order), “and others Jeremiah” (representing the exilic prophetic order).

The fact that the people had all these various perceptions about Jesus mirrors every society’s varying theologies about his origin, identity, and ministry role. Put in a very simplistic and generalized way, these were varying Christologies of the First Century Ancient Mediterranean world. However, amid these Christologies is a Christological question that this chapter would like to prod further about historical and contemporary African context. Alluding specifically to the disciples, Jesus asked, “But who do you say that I am?” This question is directed to the believing community of faith represented by the disciples. Peter responded by saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied that the declaration made by Peter was revealed to Peter by God. Just as he did to Simon Peter, the Father has since been revealing to his Church in different epochs about who Jesus is. Douglas Waruta opines that “if Peter understood Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of his contemporary Jewish thought, the African response to the above
question must reflect African consciousness.”1 Therefore, in the history of African Christianity, just who is Jesus Christ?

This chapter will define Christology from a historical perspective and then proceed to outline a brief historical background on the study of Christology in Africa. It will also provide various perspectives on Jesus from the vantage point of different denominational theological formulations, scholars, and church traditions, as well as from multiple contextual realities. Finally, the chapter will look at how Jesus is appropriated in contemporary African realities.

Definition

Christology is the study of Christ over a historical period. It is worth noting that the earliest debates about Christology began in Africa. A series of early Christological controversies occasioned these. One of the famous earlier theological controversies is the Arian controversy. This is considered by most Church historians to be one of the greatest doctrinal controversies in the history of Christianity which started on the African soil, in Alexandria, Egypt (318AD), led by an African theologian, one Arius (256–336), an ascetic presbyter from Libya. The Arian controversy was centered on the most fundamental of all questions: “who is Jesus Christ? Is He God in the flesh? Or is He just a created being like us?”2 By implication, Arius’ Christology meant that there was a time when the Son never existed. He, however, did not deny that all things were created in Christ by the Father, but he also added that “Christ was the firstborn of all that was created, implying therefore that only the Father is God.”3 Contemporary African Christological understanding of Arius would suggest that Christ is among the divinities after God, the Supreme Being.

At the opposing camp was Alexander, a senior bishop of Alexandria (313–328) who challenged Arius’ Christology. In his argument, Arius was closer to Alexander than Origen, whose standpoint was that the Son was inferior to the Father. “Alexander was challenging this Origenist tradition by saying that the Son was equal with the Father in possessing the full divine nature.”4 For Arius, Jesus’ equality with the Father bordered on polytheism. This was not just a Christological debate but also a historical one. It backdated to Origen’s theology in the 3rd century. Origen had spoken of “the Son as being of the same essence or substance (ousia) as the Father, but he had also said that the Son was eternally begotten.”5 However, Arius had misunderstood Origen for he was teaching that “the Son was a created being.”6 The issue of contestation here was the origin, status, and future of Jesus.

This Christological controversy significantly impacted the faith of the early church and monotheistic Judaism.

Christians worshiped Jesus Christ as God. They called upon him as Lord and Savior and in all aspects, entreated him as a divine figure. Was Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Logos, the same God who made heaven and earth?7

The response to this question divided the church. Some theologians agreed to say, “the Father became incarnate in the flesh and died on the cross.”8 This position was dismissed on the accusation of undermining the doctrine of divine transcendence. Other theologians agreed but, far different from the previous ones, held that the divine had to be differentiated from the human person of Jesus. That is to say that the divinity and humanity of Jesus must be distinguished. This position was also dismissed on the grounds of impiety toward Christ.

In 325, Emperor Constantine convened and presided over a council in ad 325, known as the Council of Nicaea, which was attended by 250 bishops. This council ended up excom-
communicating Arius. Eventually, the Church was split between the Western and the Eastern. The problem of how these theological dilemmas were solved was partly because the Western Church provided ecclesial leadership solutions without a consideration of the Eastern Church, in which Africa belonged. Therefore, historically, earlier in the theological formulation of the church, Christological discourses did not emanate from Africa, even though controversies came from the continent.

Various perspectives on Jesus

As much as Western missionary enterprise had good intentions to spread the Gospel to Africa’s unreached people groups, it had its drawbacks. Western missionary initiatives could not separate themselves from their cultural footing. They thus carried with them a view of a masculine, patriarchal, and white Jesus. Unfortunately, over the years of missionizing the world by the West during the development of World Christianity, this view was universalized. Not only was Christology universalized through the missionary work in Africa, but it also domineered over the prevailing local Christologies that were living and authentic but not formalized in the African context. This section will explore insights that have shaped the Christological discourse in Africa over the long history of Africa’s encounter with Western Christianity. These will include ideas from the Catholic, evangelical, and liberal versions of Christianity.

Roman Catholic Church

As a result of the previously discussed issue of Arianism, the Western Church had already forged a Christology that trumped over dissenting views. The Western Church had already embraced the doctrine of the Trinity formulated by the great theologian Tertullian. Therefore, firstly, most of the bishops from the Western Church firmly held that the Logos had eternally preexisted with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Secondly, “among the Greek-speaking churches, there was a general tendency to regard the Logos as divine, without pushing for a more exact definition of what exactly this entailed.” That meant that coming from the Greek philosophy background, the Greek theologians could compromise in favor of the council since to them, the Son was divine. Thirdly, to the remaining groups, which were used to distinguishing between the divinity and humanity of Christ, “the question did not pose itself as a direct problem to them.” Therefore to many, even in their error, Jesus was God incarnate. That posed severe problems for Arius and his supporters. Constantine himself coined the word homoousios, meaning “of the same substance” in a bid to define the relationship between Father and Son.

This word had occupied theological discussions for quite some time before and after the Arian controversy. “At Nicaea, it was accepted as into the final version of the creed as being a faithful explication of apostolic teaching.” The decision at the Council of Nicaea resulted in the cutting of the Church’s statement of faith in what is popularly known as the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed established the relationship between the person of Jesus Christ and God the Father, stating that Christ is “from the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not created, of the same essence as the Father.” Therefore, the bishops at the Council of Nicaea agreed that the Logos could be as equal as the Father, eternally coexisting and not created, but all things were created through Christ. Arianism was condemned, and Arius himself was banished and went to exile. Headed by Emperor Constantine, “the government was intervening not just in the Church’s administration affairs, but in theology.” Therefore, it was witnessed for the first time in the history of Christianity the state influencing a major theological church decision by banishing Arius for refusing to sign the Nicene Creed.
The theological controversies of this time and the involvement of the state ought not to be removed from the African Christian experience since the northern part of Africa was at the center of it. Numerous Christological controversies have rocked the African church in the past. However, the church is not in a position to handle them as a unit due to two reasons. One is the complexity of the division that is existent in some that are competing with the indigenous notions of Christ’s existence and divinity. The other is that the earlier mentioned Western theological developments dominated church teachings and were universalized through the spread of Christianity to other parts of the world. Developments in modern missionary movements and ecumenism created a broad context for theological dialogue.

**Efforts to Africanize Christology in the Roman Catholic Church**

While conversations about Christ’s personality and deity dwelt on His unity with the Father, in the Roman Church, Western debates were not really the main focus. Timothy Tennent has argued:

> The first African thinkers are not focused on the ontology of Christ and the relationship of his deity and his humanity as Western theologians have been. Africans do not invest a lot of time discussing precisely how the two natures of Christ become united into one the anthropic person. They rarely discuss how the two wills of Christ confirm him as the God-Man without confusion or compromise. These were all central concerns of the ecumenical councils that tended to focus on the person of Christ.  

One must see this as an indication that the growing African church was not interested in theological formulation for debate’s sake, but was interested in the meaning of Christ for the church. Africans were deeply religious people who had their ideas about God before the arrival of missionaries. Sanneh suggests that “theologically, God had preceded the missionary in Africa, the fact that Bible translation clinched with decisive authority.” Therefore the first Roman Catholic Fathers in Africa had to grapple with African traditional religion and gain the understanding of Africa’s views on divinities, among whom one of them was “Christ,” or was he? By estimation, one of the biggest mistakes of the White Fathers was their failure to see Christ in the African indigenous cultures. It is for this reason that Robert Schreiter is correct in arguing that “the development of local theologies depends as much on finding Christ already active in the culture as it does on bringing Christ to the culture.” According to Schreiter, a Roman Catholic Scholar, Christ is already in local cultures; it’s upon the missionaries to seek for him and see him. He adds that “The great respect for culture has a Christological basis. It grows from out of a belief that the risen Christ’s salvific activity in bringing about the kingdom of God is already going on before our arrival.” By implication, the risen Jesus Christ was already present in Africa long before the missionaries and was working among the African people. The question is, in what ways did they perceive him? One could argue that it is this realization that led Holy Ghost Fathers to focus on and stress the notion of inculturation to see and preach Christ through African eyes.

**Evangelical church**

To the evangelicals, there is no more important question than this of “who is Jesus?” According to evangelical theology in Africa, the answer to this question determines your eternity but also defines your life. More so, it tells a lot about one’s approach to issues such as sin, suffering,
sinners, and salvation. Such views of Christ in Africa among the evangelical church are not a surprise considering that it is an import of Western theology from the 19th- to 20th-century missionary enterprise in Africa. In a nutshell, for evangelicals in Africa, Christianity is Christ! Jesus is understood to be fully God and human (especially during his presence on earth). Some of the titles for Jesus’ divinity are Messiah (Christos), Emmanuel (God with us), Lord (Kyrios), Son of God, Logos (Word), and the Resurrection.

These titles of Jesus are synonymous with the images of Christ according to evangelical Christianity. To African evangelicals, the titles and images are taken seriously, albeit with a reservation on their meaning for an African Christian. For example, Jesus is the “door.” From an evangelical perspective, this is the door to eternal life, meaning any person who doesn’t go through that door has no access to salvation. However, to an African Christian, even though the idea of “evangelical” could mean a few more other things, it could be the door to success, favor with God, wealth, healing, etc. This aspect of the imagery of Christ will be explored further in this chapter.

Evangelicals also believe that Christ is a Mediator. The idea that only God can stand before God to mediate for man is not a matter of further debate because only God can stand in the gap between God and humanity to mediate for the salvation of all humanity. Also, Christ’s deity means that Christ lives in the lives of his followers and gives them power and authority over sin (Gal. 2:20). It also means that Christians have power and authority over Satan (Col. 3:1–3; Eph. 1:19–22). One of the unique aspects of Jesus’ deity as per evangelical Christianity that stands out from the rest is the idea that the followers of Christ are given the power to become like him through a process known as glorification (Phil. 3:20–21). While this is welcome in the African concept, it leaves a lot of room for navigation. This is because for an African religionist, transacting ideas of “likeness” between the self and the divine ought to be treated with a lot of caution. Nonetheless, African evangelical Christians abstractly believe it even when it doesn’t concretely make a lot of sense as to what that means.

Jesus the Messiah is the Mediator between God and humanity, the One who brings salvation to humankind. Access to His salvation is limited to only those who accept Him as a personal savior. Salvation cannot be communal in the evangelical sense. It is a personal gift which all the persons who have accepted Jesus receive. There has to be that definite moment that one has to choose to accept Jesus and believe that He is divine and has the power to save from sin. Christ’s salvation in this sense is strictly from sin, and not inclusive of non-living things like power structures and environments.

**Liberal Christianity**

The word “liberal” carries connotations of “freedom” and “liberality.” The person and work of Christ according to liberal Christology goes beyond the limited views of Catholicism and evangelicalism. To liberal Christianity, Jesus is still the mediator between God and humanity, but his mediatiorship includes all people regardless of their socio-economic, racial, and sexual orientations. Here, knowledge and invitation of Jesus transcend any human limitation and it is inclusive.

Quite often, Jesus is perceived to be the Mediator between God and humanity who welcomes all people, including those who are socially, racially, and sexually marginalized. Biblical images of Christology are taken from narratives such as Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, the meeting of Jesus with the Pharisee and the publican, Jesus and Mary Magdalene, Jesus and the poor, sick, and oppressed, and Jesus and children. Among liberal Christology, Jesus is perceived as One who identifies with the lowly, and those downtrodden by the society’s might. However, He comes down to identify with them, and the entire discourse on Jesus in the Gospels is a confrontation with the religious and political establishment that was against the people.
In its expression, liberal Christology sees salvation as extending to power structures (religious and political) that are oppressive to humankind. Salvation, according to liberal Christology, can salvage non-living things since it sees wholeness in the world. This is a Christology that accommodates people from all walks of life regardless of their sexual orientation. Therefore, it accommodates the LGBTQ proponents, a move which is highly criticized by Catholic and evangelical mainstream counterparts. Here, Christ is seen as One who comes with open arms with the invitation to come as you are, without necessarily changing who you are, and He will receive you. Therefore, salvation, according to this Christology, is very inclusive. Not only does it liberate members of the society who lack necessities, but it also has the power to save the oppressive structures that make people poor.

While liberal Christology positions favor oppressed and suppressed Africans, there remains a debate on the continent about the tenets and theology of the progressive churches. For the past decades, African Christianity has wrestled with some of the socio-cultural values such as pro-choice, and LGBTQ, which are generally associated with liberal Christianity. Some African Christians, especially those of the evangelical persuasion, continue to argue that Christians who follow the teachings of Jesus cannot support such lifestyles. But progressive Christians on the continent call for an openness to dialog on these contentious issues by pointing out that the love of Christ which all Christians share is limitless. Their opponents argue that these positions reflect postmodernism and post-Christian error, a view which mistakenly associates postmodern thinking as necessarily post-Christian, thus ignoring some of the subtleties of postmodernism which are about a critique of the dominant Western narrative.

The African struggle with foreign Christologies is real. On the one hand, we have the Catholic and evangelical Christianity whose images of Christ still retain some colonial and racial undertones manifested in domination, exclusivism, and oppression. In these, the power of the state and even the images of the cross of Christ symbolize older versions of Christianity. While on the other hand, you have liberal Christianity, whose Christology is associated with images of degradation of African moral values, which have struggled to find a place in African society. This has necessitated a call for an African Christology from among the Africans themselves. In the next section, we turn to a Christology in Africa.

**Christology in Africa**

A Christological lacuna

Mutisya, a church elder who through kwitikila (belief) became a Christian, is a faithful Christian. He attends his local African inland church meetings every Sunday. Unfortunately, one of his sons is taken ill and passes away. A week later his cattle contract a strange disease from an epidemic which wipe out half of his livestock. He shares these misfortunes with his local pastor and fellow elders, and all they can do is pray for and with him. A month later his niece is involved in a horrible road accident and is hospitalized, while his son in the city is laid off from work following a departmental retrenchment. These misfortunes become so overwhelming for elder Mutisya. Following consultation on these adverse events with his wives, he opts to visit a nganga (diviner) for intervention. Word gets to the church leadership that Mutisya has consulted with a nganga who spat on him and his entire family and exorcised evil spirits. The local church leadership, upon confirming these matters, not only removes Mutisya from his leadership role but also excommunicates him from the fellowship, claiming that they are taking these actions per the teachings of the Bible. The actions taken by the church devastate Mutisya and even the other members of the church who are left wondering what is wrong with consulting another medium for his life’s misfortunes. Is there a possibility that Mutisya wanted to see Jesus imaged in another way than his church had taught him?
This fictional story is the closest it can get to describing a Christological lacuna that exists in most African societies today. There seems to be a faith in Christ among African believers, which is devoid of their particular culture, identity, and beliefs. As Nasimiyu-Wasike puts it, “Many African Christians have developed a dual personality. They have the Christian identity for Sunday worship and when things are going well, whereas their African identity is active in times of crisis, illness, and misfortunes.” This dualism of faith is in the backdrop of a continent that has been studied to have the largest Christian population in the world.

It is in moments of crisis that the relevance of Jesus’ ministry as told by the Western missionaries is questioned. Such is the example of one Enyi Ben Udoh, while a refugee during the Biafran war in Nigeria sparked his quest for the image of Christ in Africa. In his doctoral work that was later published as cited by Stinton, *Guest Christology: An Interpretive View of the Christological Problem in Africa*, the Presbyterian minister recounts:

The traditional way in which Christ was introduced in Africa was largely responsible for the prevailing faith schizophrenia among African Christians. He further defines the problem as a “religious double-mindedness” or a dilemma of combining the Christian principles with African traditional religion without being fully African or completely Christian.

One can emphasize here that the prevailing Christology in Africa is still dominated by a Western worldview brought by Euro-American missionaries, which encouraged Africans to abandon their cultural beliefs and practices. As a result, Africans approached and received the Gospel as a *tabula rasa* and had to take it all in uncritically. Hence the question, “why is there a qualifier before all other modern Christology and no one for Western Christology?” There is African, Latin-American, and black Christology. But there is never an American or European Christology. It can only be assumed that the Euro-American Christology has been universalized and dictates the norm in the global scope of things. Their images of Jesus Christ, which are mostly foreign to most Africans, are pushed to the local people as “the theology” (systematic theology). “The marginalized persons were co-opted into believing and perpetuating these images as universal images of Christ. Thus, the theology of the person of Jesus tended to be philosophical and abstract.” This is what might have caused the Christological lacuna. What was left out from the African concept of Christology after the Western missionary enterprise is the historical, existential Jesus of the New Testament. For decades this is the one that African scholars have sought to find in their Christological discourses.

Due to this Christological lacuna, African Christologies are seldom discussed by Africans. This is because the foreign Christologies are still dominant in both the academia (theological institutions) and praxis at the parish (church) level. Theologian Nyamiti explains the reason for this Western theological dominance in the most elaborate way possible:

Many of these Christologies are still unknown to the majority, and even where they are known, they are seldom taken seriously. White theology still dominates in Africa, and in most seminaries and other theological institutes, African Christologies are either unknown or simply ignored. When known they are at best treated as an appendix—in summary, form—to Christologies from abroad. This may also be because many African Christologies are still rudimentary; none of them could be taken as sufficiently profound and comprehensive to answer to the needs for Christological teaching in seminaries. But the same could be said about many of the Christologies from abroad—which are, nonetheless, usually taken more seriously.
However, there are multiple African Christologies practiced in the local African churches that are not part of academic discourses and theologies published by African theologians. However, these Christologies exist in very latent, unsystematic, and mostly in oral forms. What follows is an analysis of various African Christologies from various African scholars and church traditions. All these are attempts to answer the initial question posed earlier in this chapter: “who do people say that I am?”

Before an analysis of African Christologies from various scholars and church traditions, it is essential to pause and look at four methodologies of doing African Christology as outlined by Tennent’s esoteric view as an outsider. In his seminal work, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, Tennent outlines four methodologies.

1. “A Theology from Below”\textsuperscript{22}—as opposed to their Western counterparts, African theologians are not preoccupied with the ontology of Christ, His union with the Father, and His nature. Rather, on the contrary, African Christology is holistic in integrating Christ’s person and work. Its view of Christ is constantly informed and related to the historical Jesus of Nazareth who walked on water, healed the sick, fed 5,000 people, cast out demons, etc. Thus, Christology in the African mind is what Jesus did and is still doing. It emanates from what is happening in the various African contexts and how Jesus’ work in the Gospels can be replicated in these instances. This is the main point of departure from the Western Christology, whose “Jesus Christ who was preached was often a truncated Christ, not measuring up fully to the biblical picture of Jesus’ life, work, and ministry.”\textsuperscript{23}

2. “Conscious Awareness of Traditional Christological Formulations”\textsuperscript{24}—unlike their Western counterparts, African Christological theologians respect and are in touch with the prevailing historical formulations about Christ. They attach their discourses on the historical Western formulations but ground their conclusions in the souls of people to make sense of Jesus, hence stressing the importance of Christologies of older churches.

3. “Connecting Christ to Africa’s Pre-Christian Past”\textsuperscript{25}—linking this methodology with the earlier story about Mutisya, Africans have wrestled with the question of how to be a Christian and at the same time be authentically an African. Therefore, African theologians are interested in methods that drive them to know how Christ connects with Africa’s pre-Christian past. This is in negation of the idea that Africans should approach the Christian faith as \textit{tabula rasa}—with a blank slate in their minds devoid of the African past and present experience.

4. “An Emphasis on the Power and Victory of Christ”\textsuperscript{26}—all of the African Christologies are built on a common underlying theme of the “power and victory of Christ.”\textsuperscript{27} This is very evident in the names of churches, especially in the Pentecostal church movement in Africa. These names communicate the power and victory of Jesus over the devil, sicknesses, and poverty. Having overcoming faith in a victorious Christ is the key to tapping into his power.

There are six major Christological themes in the African context that are known. Some of them are pervasive in the African ecclesiology, while others are not. Some are tied to the theologizing of some particular African theologians, while others are tied to specific church traditions. These themes are Christ as Healer, Liberator, Chief, Mediator, Master of Initiation, and Ancestor/Elder/Brother. These themes will be weaved into the Christologies of the following African scholars as well as African Church traditions.

The remaining segment of this chapter will highlight some leading scholars in African Christology and various Church traditions. Some of the leading Christological scholars in Africa that this chapter will highlight are Kwame Bediako, Charles Nyamiti, Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike,
and Laurenti Magesa. Of the many church traditions in Africa, this chapter will focus on the perspectives of Christ from three dynamic ones. These are namely the East African Revival movement, which was also known as Balokole (the saved ones), the African Instituted Churches (AICs), and the Pentecostal movement.

**Kwame Bediako**

Put on the continuity-discontinuity continuum, Bediako would fall somewhere halfway on the continuum, as he emphasizes what he refers to as the uniqueness of Christ amid a plurality of religions in Africa. Addressing the evangelical church tradition, he argues that:

> We cannot avoid serious engagement with the religious and spiritual issues that African Traditional Religions raise for us since they form the cultural background of the Christian faith of most African Christians. Also, the necessities of theological apologetics require that we make sense of our Christian affirmations only about whatever alternatives are found in the contexts in which we make those affirmations.

According to Bediako’s Christology, faith in Jesus does not come to an African mind without backdrop cultural experience. The cultural and religious backdrop informs faith in Christ of the Africans. Therefore, Christ is among other deities (lords) as the unique one. He also emphasizes Christ’s affirmations—as recognition, not an assertion of other religions, such as the African traditional religion. In the context of religious pluralism, this view of Christ deals with the earlier mentioned exclusivity of Christianity in Christ. Bediako claims that “This is the understanding of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:5–6, where his very affirmation that there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, is made about the other ‘so-called many lords.’”

Therefore, the affirmation that Christ is Lord for evangelicals in the African context is a recognition that Africans view Jesus among other lords, only that he is the superior lord. This kind of notion is helpful in discipleship as an African worshipper, when in crises of faith, will default to Jesus’ Lordship rather than other deities. This does not necessarily mean that the deities are obliterated from the African’s concept of reality. Denying that is self-deceptive and often insincere to oneself and the community within which that person lives. This recognition makes Jesus accessible to an African worshipper among other lords who pale in comparison to Christ.

**Charles Nyamiti**

Nyamiti’s Christology has primarily been an examination of two approaches. The first approach is from the Bible to African reality, whereby we “find out the Christological subjects which have particular interest for the African and to confront the New Testament teaching about Christ with the traditional African worldview.” With this view, which is heavily borrowed from Mbiti’s Christology, Christ is viewed as the Christus Victor, the one who works miracles and conquers evil powers that are feared by the African person. Some of these images of Christ view Him from the Scripture in cultural terms as the Son of God, Servant of God, Redeemer, Conqueror, Lord, and Christ.

The second approach is from African reality to Christology. In this approach, “the author examines the mystery of Christ from either the perspective of the African worldview or from the angle of some particular theme taken from the African worldview or culture.” This is the thematic approach, which is commonly employed in Africa by most church traditions. This approach is used to make sense of Christ during essential rituals in life, especially during
transitional rituals. For example, when dealing with death, “death among the Ewe-Mina tribe of Togo … is seen understood as a necessary passage to life.”32 Due to the strong belief in life after death for such African communities, there is a need to believe in Christ, the Ancestor who guarantees life in that realm. “Christ as the Joto-Ancestor means that He is the Ancestor who is the source of life and the fulfillment of the cosmotheandric relationship in the world.”33 This is the most commonly used approach to doing Christology in Africa. It looks into African reality with its Christological themes such as Mediator, Chief, Ancestor/Brother, etc.

Lately, some of the previously renowned themes are losing their power and popularity. For example, images such as Chief are losing power and influence. “Chiefs have never been readily accessible to the ordinary [person]; they had to be approached through the middlemen. Chiefs generally live in walled settlements and are therefore not exposed to ordinary contacts of their subjects.”34 This counters the Biblical notion of Christ, who is supposed to be approachable at all times and is aware of the plight of ordinary people. Thus, an alternative image of Christ is preferable in some African societies. That is, “the image of elder Brother taken from the passage of ‘the firstborn among many brethren who with Him form the Church’ in which there is no distinction of race, sex, color or social condition.”35 This is a more transformative image in the sense that elder brothers are respected yet approachable. Unlike chiefs, whose homesteads are surrounded by fences, elder brothers are born in the same home like everyone else, and they themselves experience the challenges in life that people go through. Nyamiti’s Christology seems to be at the end of continuity as he reads the passages literally.

Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike

African Christology is not complete without a discussion about Christ’s relationship with women. Woman theology is central to Africa’s understanding of Christology, which centers Christ’s work among women as of great significance. People have generally ascribed the qualities of nurturing and protecting life to women because of their gender. Nasimiyu-Wasike views Jesus Christ as one who protected and nurtured life during his earthly ministry. “He is the nurturer of life, especially that of the weak and the marginalized.”36 Attributing Jesus’ motherly and nurturing or protective characteristics to personality and ministry is the missing piece in the Western Christology where Jesus is presented as a masculine Jewish male segregationist.

Jesus’ appearance is the counterculture of the Jewish traditions where unmarried men did not interact with single or married women. The male dominance in the Jewish culture (and later in the world) had to be divinely broken. “Here, we realize that Jesus does not endorse male virtues or masculine approaches to human existence to the exclusion of feminine approaches. Rather, he legitimizes stereotypically female virtues.”37 Hence he challenged both men and women to be converted and realize a new way of being human. In this view of Christology, Christ did not become a man to teach us to be divine but to teach us to be truly human.

The African woman can identify with Jesus’ ministry because, like Palestine, African life and culture are equally male-dominated. The family and social disconnect witnessed in modern-day Africa could be as a result of a broken or warped Christology that is missing the contribution of Jesus as a nurturer and protector of life.

The African woman’s primary experience about other people is that of the mother, a nurturer of life. Here we would like to invite the African man to follow Jesus and take on the character of life nurturing, so that all women and men Christians in Africa may nurture one another and all of life on the African continent.38
This approach to Christology of ascribing to Jesus the femininity that he espoused in his ministry is the only Christology that has the power to penetrate the world’s social, economic, and political structures that have plundered Africa. The capitalistic economic systems that rule the world are mostly white, dominantly male, and necessarily Christian.

Africa continues to experience dehumanizing and racist policies concerning trade, enforced by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which have created Structural Adjustment Programmes and the heavy economic debts. These have reduced women, men, and children in Africa to a vulnerable and difficult situation.

This is neo-colonization taking place in Africa. While colonization ensured that Africans were subjugated within their land, and their wealth became plunder for overseas countries, neo-colonization plunders through oppressive foreign policies. Gospel narrative such as that of Jesus feeding the 5,000 people (Jn. 6:10–13) because he pitied their having stayed an entire day without food and their weariness is the antidote to the oppressive economic systems that are led by men in collaboration with African politicians who are also predominantly male.

Africans must learn to see and name their pain and oppression that is hidden in the structural evils of society. Christianity in Africa, therefore, must create methodologies with which to utilize Christ's motherly nature to penetrate and destroy (exorcise) the evil spirits in the social, economic, and political structures that have dehumanized vulnerable people. “This brings us to another Christological model, which is much closer to the African reality and which speaks to many. And that is the model of Christ, the healer.” Jesus healed through exorcism and calling upon one’s faith to believe that God can perform the miracle. Jesus’ healing was from both physical and spiritual diseases and suffering. Therefore, Christ as the healer is what Africa needs to restore, not just for individuals and groups, but also for structural evils to be exorcised when individuals are delivered.

Liberation theology is a hallmark for Africa, and Magesa is one of the strongest proponents of Christ as the liberator of Africa. Jesus’ inaugural speech in the reading of the scroll at the synagogue as captured by St. Luke sets the tone for his liberative ministry.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.”

(Lk 4:18–19)

Christology cannot be disassociated with Jesus’ mission, which is freedom of the masses from poverty, and spiritual and physical oppression.

That is why Magesa opines that

To consider Jesus Christ as the liberator in the African situation is therefore much more than just a metaphor. It is an attempt to present the only Jesus that can be comprehensible and credible among the African rural masses, urban poor, and idealistic youth.

Only liberation Christology can give the Church in Africa the prophetic voice to say no to the social, economic, and political ills that have scourged Africa. Magesa gives such an example of the church’s prophetic voice empowered by liberation Christology.
Christology in Africa

He (Jesus) does this through God’s continual self-revelation in history, the Christian God being a God of revelation. In the process, He gives voice to the voiceless so that farmers, for example, can demand fair prices for their produce. He instills courage to the weakhearted so that industrial workers, domestic servants and casual laborers can say no to the arbitrary exploitation of their person and labor.42

In other words, liberation Christology comes to Africa as the only hope of restoring dignity to a very debased and dehumanized lot in the continent. It is in the liberation that dehumanization of prostitutes, street families, and the sick and lame will be considered and addressed. This can only happen when the historical Jesus is concretely brought to the visibility of the African Church by removing the abstractness with which the “colonial” Jesus was introduced in the continent. According to Magesa, “When we speak of Jesus as Liberator, then we refer to His assurance of solidarity with us, particularly but not exclusively as Church, in the struggle—His struggle—to diminish poverty among the masses of the people.”43 According to Magesa, a liberating Christology is thus one that gives the Church the responsibility of being the healing balm to the nations. Therefore, the Church is not only a liberating agency but also a healing one. Therefore, “Our Christology is thus also concretely ecclesiology.”44

African Christology in church traditions

African Independent Churches

With the gaining of political independence in most African nations in the 1950s and 1960s, the Church in Africa also sought to emancipate itself from the dominating white leadership and administration. The African Churches were left free to do the commonly known three selves: self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting. It is said that the Church left out one “self,” that is, self-theologizing. That can be said of the missionary churches, but not of the African Independent Churches. The AICs are African instituted churches that sought to decolonize theology of the white domination. The AICs’ Christology was among the first to self-theologize.

In the 17th century, a woman in the kingdom of Kongo (present-day Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC) named Kimpa Vita became a nganga (a medium).

About 1703, in a dream, she received a vision from St. Anthony, one of the most beloved saints in Kongo, who warned her that the colonial churches were deeply in error. Jesus, she now learned, was a Black Kongolese, as were the apostles and popular saints like Saint Francis.45

In fact, according to Kimpa Vita, “Jesus had been born in the Kongo capital of Sao Salvador. Kimpa Vita’s overarching message was that African Christians needed to find their way to God, even if that meant using traditional practices condemned by the White priests.”46

That introduced Africa to a stream of many prophets and prophetesses who, through dreams and visions which involve the New Testament mysticism, were called apart to deliver their people. These were people like Harris of Liberia and Simon Kimbangu of Kimbanguist movement in Belgian Congo. Simon Kimbangu took up the personalities of Jesus as a prophet and healer at a time when the worldwide influenza epidemic in 1918 had devastated Africa. “Kimbangu preached an orthodox puritanical Christianity, but was distinctively Africa in his invocation of the help of the ancestors and his focus on himself as a charismatic leader and mediator between God and the people.”47 This is to show that in the entrance of AICs, Christology was seen as
embedded in certain individuals who took up the role of mediatorship and political saviors. Many of Kimbangu’s followers saw him as the African savior.

In Africa, formalization of AICs was achieved in the formation of Organization of African Independent Churches (OAIC) in Cairo, Egypt, in 1978. The OAIC, whose headquarters is in Nairobi, Kenya, is now found in various African regions, for example, in West Africa, South Africa, Eastern Africa, Madagascar, and Central Africa. This institutionalization of the AIC through OAIC has also formalized theology within the Church. Under OAIC, the AICs are churches that acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, which has either separated by secession from a mission or an existing African Independent Church. AICs are formed under the Christological premise that Jesus Christ is the protector of African values, from moral erosion of the West. Hence, besides preaching the Gospel, the other role of AICs is to protect the African values and forms of society against the impact of colonialism, and the overly restrictive aspects of the missionary founded churches.

There are three types of AICs, and in each is a unique Christology that guides their operation and worship expression. First are the nationalist churches, whose broader function was a movement formed to seize political power from the Europeans. They saw Christ as the liberator and who frees people from colonial oppression. Second are the spiritual (also known as Roho churches in East Africa) churches. They view Jesus as the alternative “counter” community maker who brings the Holy Spirit to the Church. They were formed in opposition to missionary models of society. They are also called Aladura, prayer or prophetic churches (in West Africa); Akurinu (East Africa); and Zionist or Apostolic (Southern Africa). They see Jesus’ role as the prophet who comes to announce the Kingdom of God formed in the African society. Third are the African Pentecostal Churches, which are founded after political independence, influenced by the global Pentecostal movement, and strongly oriented toward the future while retaining roots in African culture. They see Christ in a more comprehensive sense, in that their Christology fits well in a globalizing world.

The primary image of Christ in modern-day AICs is the healer. “Having faith in Jesus Christ and trusting the directives of the healer is another important theological element of the healing process.” Thus, AICs healers acknowledge that Jesus heals, “yet he uses those with the gift of healing to effect healing.” The role of Jesus as a healer in AICs has made the church followers shun modern medicine, which is considered Western and with evil intent.

East African Revival Movement

The East African Revival “was a movement of spiritual renewal which started in a small way at Gahini mission station in the early 1930s.” The movement started in Ruanda and quickly spread to Uganda and other parts of East Africa. Before spreading to the rest of the region, it was known as the Ruanda Revival. The revivalist movement was started as a response to the rapid secularization of Europe, from where most mission churches such as the London Church Missionary Society (CMS) had originated from. Thus, from the name, the African Church was seeking a re-awakening of Christianity by Christ or often referred to as awakening the sleepy church.

Since evangelistic and preaching ministry was at the center of the revivalist movement, a Christology of Christ crucified was central. According to Kinoti, “the Church was beginning to discover certain truths about the Christ he had come to Africa to preach.”

1. Jesus was the one who came into the burning furnace to be very near us and to walk with us (Dan. 3:25).
2. Jesus is real and satisfies any circumstances.
3. Jesus is the place of rest, in a deeper place of understanding of the victorious life.
4. Jesus never lets His loved ones have more than they can bear.
5. Sin hinders communion with the Lord.
6. Jesus is the Truth, the Victory, and a personal living Savior.

The assumption was that the East African region was going through a period of spiritual drought and needed to experience Jesus anew. But for that to happen, sin had to be gotten rid of to allow Jesus to move in the region with a massive revival. “Focus on Christ, and the Cross meant a fresh understanding of sin, repentance, salvation, Christian fellowship, evangelism, and daily victorious living.” Christology in the East African Revival was centered on the victory of the cross, and hence carried the image of the victorious Christ who conquers sin and death. The cross of Christ was viewed as one that breaks all the social, racial, and regional barriers to make the Church as one united in love and humility. Thus, through this imaging of Christ, the revivalist movement is known to be inter-ethnic, inter-racial, inter-denominational, inter-territorial, and now international.

The Pentecostal movement

Much of the praised vast spread of Christianity in the Global South, particularly in Africa, can be attributed to the rise and spread of the Pentecostalism in the continent. You cannot talk about Jesus in Africa and fail to mention the Pentecostal movement. This is the only Church tradition that carries with it a heavy Christology in its definition and main emphasis. The Pentecostal movement is associated with four main emphases: “belief in Jesus Christ as Savior; belief in Jesus Christ as Baptizer in the Holy Spirit; belief in Jesus Christ as Healer; and belief in Jesus Christ as the King who will soon to judge the world.” Therefore, Pentecostal Christology in Africa carries four images of Christ: Savior, Baptizer, Healer, and King. Jesus’ healing and deliverance are witnessed. Even though Pentecostalism is not only continental but also present in the diaspora, it still carries these themes with it. While most of its theology is expressed orally and not in the reading of creeds, its Christology is lived out practically, with Christ seen as literally healing people of sicknesses.

While the movement of the Holy Spirit is key to Pentecostalism in Africa’s worship, it is seen to be Christ Himself working among His people. Therefore, quite often, Jesus, Lord, and Spirit are referenced interchangeably. Even in the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, it is the Lord, Jesus Himself, who baptizes people after their experience of salvation, which is accompanied by speaking in tongues. The Pentecostal movement seems to be a follow up of revivalist and AICs in that they continue with their work of destroying the works of Satan through witchcraft and diseases, and many other ills that bring about human suffering. However, they are distinct from AICs. Newer Pentecostal Churches (NPCs) see Jesus in the heart of prosperity Gospel, a Christ who doesn’t want anyone to be poor. However, the irony is that most of the NPCs in Africa are physically located near slums and informal settlements with low-income earners. It has been suspected that extortion and manipulation of the poor take place in NPCs through giving and tithing, a fact that counters the initial Christology of the main Pentecostal movement. Because of this warped Christology, some of the NPCs are considered to be pathologies.

African Christology and the situation in Africa

A student once asked in a class on Doing Theology in the African Context that I was recently co-facilitating: “How does African Christianity live side by side with all the socio-economic and political dysfunction in the continent?” The guest lecturer, Agbonkhiameneghe E. Orobator, responded by saying that, in any proselytization process, something is lost. While transitioning from African theology and practice to missionary Christianity, Africans lost connection with
their mystical images. Orobator grew up with the traditional religious altars and shrines in his home that represented a divine presence of deities and ancestors. Thus, in his experience at an early stage in his life, religion was not an experience you needed to step out of to engage in life; instead, you lived it on a day to day basis. In African ontology, religion is not separable from life. These altars and shrines were religious icons that were tangible evidence of divine presence. That connection to mysticism brought a sense of awe and honor for the gods and so shaped morality in the social structures and public spaces.

Missionary Christianity demystified African mysticism, hence dismissing the African experience of worship to God as pagan and animist. Therefore, they removed those icons and demonized the religious experience of the African people. That was when Africans lost connection with their deities. Now enter African Christianity, which is somewhat a translation of a foreign religion but mostly a rejection of Western Christianity and civilization. In trying to renew itself, African Christianity has made some wrong turns that have led to pathologies of Christianity and theologies. These Christianities have enabled oppressive structures (if not oppressing the people by themselves). They have misrepresented Christ in the process.

What we need now is a renewal of African Christianity that will restore the awareness of mystical powers so that Africa can be reconnected to the Deity and restore her soul. This will happen when we restore a Christology that is rooted in the historical Jesus as well as applicable to the African experience. Then Christ will begin to heal, be Savior, be the Brother that has been coveted in the history of Christology, as has been seen in this chapter. For that to happen, a few things need to happen:

1. A restoration of tangible evidence of Christ in various Church traditions and experiences is required. Physical symbolism of Christ needs to be returned in sacred places of worship as an aid to African worshippers to concretize what is often abstract. This will help to return the place of mysticism in Africa’s Christology. It is in the mystics that the fear of God is restored that respects humanity.

2. A Christology that can permeate socio-economic, religious, and political structures is needed. Such a Christology in Africa will revive Churches to play their prophetic role in calling social and economic ills as they are. It will teach Africans to name their oppressor and hold him/her accountable. Such a Christology is capable of confronting corruption, bad healthcare systems, agents that are deteriorating our environment, etc.

3. I propose an honor Christology that dignifies and humanizes the African person. This was the sole reason for the incarnation of Christ, to humanize people who had been dehumanized. For Africa, this will call for a Christology that is livable in public and private spaces of our experience.

4. Lastly, I call upon a mainstreaming of African Christology in the theological institutions and institutions of higher learning. African Christology cannot continue to be a subservient unit under Western theologies that are marginalized and less discussed here in Africa. If Christ is going to be lived out in Africa as He seeks to be, then gatekeepers in African seminaries must mainstream African Christology as central to theological discourses in the continent.

**Notes**


3 Needham, 1:211.
4 Needham, 1:203.
6 Needham, 2,000 Years of Christ’s Power, 1:203.
7 Needham, 1:174.
8 Needham, 1:174.
9 Needham, 1:176.
10 Needham, 1:176.
11 Needham, 1:176.
12 Needham, 1:204.
13 Needham, 1:204.
14 Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 113.
17 Schreiter, 29.
22 Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 113.
23 Tennent, 113.
24 Tennent, 114.
25 Tennent, 115.
26 Tennent, 115.
27 Tennent, 115.
29 Bediako, 38.
30 Mugambi and Magesa, *Jesus in African Christianity*, 17.
31 Mugambi and Magesa, 18.
32 Mugambi and Magesa, 18.
33 Mugambi and Magesa, 19.
34 Mugambi and Magesa, 20.
35 Mugambi and Magesa, 20.
37 Nasimiyyu-Wasike, 108.
38 Nasimiyyu-Wasike, 108.
41 Mugambi and Magesa, *Jesus in African Christianity*, 85.
42 Mugambi and Magesa, 85.
43 Mugambi and Magesa, 87.
44 Mugambi and Magesa, 87.
46 Jenkins, 48.
47 Jenkins, 50.
49 Stinton, 49.
50 Mugambi and Magesa, Jesus in African Christianity, 60.
51 Mugambi and Magesa, 62.
52 Mugambi and Magesa, 67.

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