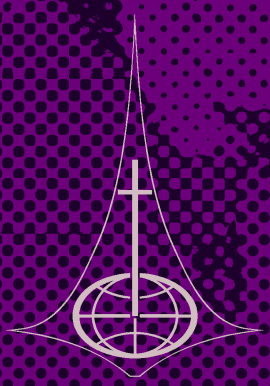
THEOLOGY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH Vol. 5

Theological Practices That Matter



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Theological Practices that Matter

Theology in the Life of the Church, vol. 5
Karen L. Bloomquist, Editor
on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation

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A Critique of African Theology's Anthropology: Why are Children Excluded from the Table?

Kenneth Mtata

Introduction

This article seeks to show that the exclusion of children from the Eucharist in most African Lutheran churches is a result of the social position children have occupied in the hierarchy of the construction of personhood in African thought. It will be suggested here that the communitarian construction of personhood, upon which African theological reflection has traditionally been based, is inadequate with regard to children and other people at the margins. As Gwinyai Muzorewa put it,

> [t]he concept of humanity, which has largely determined all other African cosmological concepts, is central in traditional religion. How African humanity has traditionally perceived itself is of primary importance to a developing African theology.[1]

Claiming that the African person is communitarian conceals the hierarchical construction of personhood, which reduces children to less than full persons and results in their being excluded from the Eucharist. This is contrary to the basic tenets of the Lutheran Confessions that teach that we receive salvation through the means of grace and not because we qualify for them.

In other words, a faulty anthropology produces a faulty theology, and a faulty theology produces a skewed anthropology. There prevails an uncritical assumption that African personhood, upon which African theol-

[1] Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000), p. 16; cf. John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (New York: Praeger, 1975), p. 77.

ogy is built, is communitarian. This assumption is inaccurate and distorts African theology.

The absence of children in African theological reflection

It is neither possible, nor necessary, to give a detailed overview of African theology here. My purpose here is to show that the absence of children in African theological reflection was (and still is) a result of the fact that in African theology the person is presupposed as object rather than subject. In agreement with many other African and non-African theologians, Tinyiko S. Maluleke observed the "dynamism and innovation" in African Christian practice and theological reflection.[2] Although he conflates "African Christianity and African theology," using the two terms "interchangeably," I still think he is correct in the creativity he observes in both African Christianity and theology.[3] Although Maluleke is one of the few African critics of the nostalgic embrace of African culture, he has not questioned the construction of African personhood as a faulty base on which to build African theology. A brief investigation into the genealogy of African theology will support this assertion.

The first generation of African theology

Josiah U. Young's categorization of the phases of African theology offers some important insights,[4] even though some important aspects of it have been challenged.[5] The first generation of African theologians emerged in the early days of independence from colonial rule. Muzorewa suggests that the formalization of African theology dates back to the "inauguration of

[2] Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-first Century," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997), pp. 4–23, here p. 4.

[3] It is appropriate to think of African theology as an academic reflection on African Christian practices in dialogue with existing theological categories whether or not from Western theology. See also Mika Vähäkangas, *In Search of Foundations for African Catholicism: Charles Nyamiti's Theological Methodology* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 10–14. This debate is not the focus of this paper, but the relevant issue for this discussion is the point of creativity in African theology that Maluleke raises.

[4] The categorization used here is critically borrowed from Josiah U. Young III, *African Theology: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography* (London: Greenwood Press, 1993).

[5] Maluleke, op. cit. (note 2), p. 6.

the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC)" in Kampala.[6] This first phase was presided over by an African élite, who had been educated in "mission schools and often pursued their higher education abroad."[7] Theology produced by this generation of African theologians resonated with the Pan-African discourse in its affirmation of the African person as a cultural person. Such theologians as Edward Blyden, Bolaji Idowu and Kwesi Dickson focused more on the discovery of the "African personality," a perspective that sought to redeem African personhood from the "savage" representations of derogatory colonial narratives. Driven by the "cultural nationalism that owed more to Westernization than to popular culture," this generation of African scholars were more "focused on religio-cultural analysis, with little, if any, social analysis."[8]

One leading figure promoting African religious and cultural tradition was John Mbiti, whose project centered on recovering those aspects of African cosmology and culture that were in continuity with the worldview of the gospel.[9] Mbiti constructed an African ethno-philosophy of time that contradicted Western appropriations of the Christian faith and could be at home in Africa. Though criticized for essentializing and de-regionalizing African culture, Mbiti's contribution became the basis for most African theological reflection. One of Mbiti's major contributions, was his claim that the African was communitarian in his [*sic*] personhood.[10]

While this generation of African theologians affirmed African cultural identities, it did very little to deconstruct African culture. There was a glaring absence of a clear critique of the oppressive nature of the culture upon which this generation's theological reflection has been built. Apart from its insensitivity to the plight of African women, this theological project ignored children, since in many African cultures children are not considered to be full persons. The theology focused on adult males, both living and dead. Children were only mentioned in relation to the taboos of barrenness and infertility in African thought.[11] In other words, the first

[6] Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 57.

[7] Young, op. cit. (note 4), p. 13.

[8] Ibid., p. 13.

[9] Ibid., p. 17.

[10] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), pp. 108–9. Note that gender was not central to Mbiti's theology.

[11] Ibid., pp. 142–3.

phase of African theology was designed by adult males, for adult males. This, however, did not go unnoticed and unchallenged.

The second generation of African theology

While in 1963 the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), the formal context for the first phase of African theology, was dominated by theologians north of the Limpopo, the 1976 meeting of the Ecumenical Association of the Third World Theologians (EATWOT) ushered in a new phase of African theology.[12] This second phase was influenced by elements from South African Liberation Theology, African Black Theology and African Womanist Theology. According to Young, this "new guard," sought a "new Africa, not a neo-colonial one where old contradictions persist in pernicious guise."[13] The ethos of this new theology is summed up in EATWOT's "Final Statement":

> We call for an active commitment to the promotion of justice and the prevention of exploitation, the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, discrimination, and dehumanisation.[14]

As Young further points out, through further dialogue, this new generation of African theologians sharpened their "liberation" emphasis and their commitment "to the underside of history," aware of the fact that since its independence from Western domination, Africa had not progressed but "regressed."[15]

This second phase of "emerging theologies"[16] was committed to socio- and religio-cultural analysis,[17] and highlighted the significant contribution of African resources, which traditionally had barely been taken into consideration. These included the contribution of the African Interdependent Churches (AICs), seen as "accomplishing the task of bridging Western

[12] Young, op. cit. (note 4), p. 25; Maluleke, op. cit. (note 2), p. 20.

[13] Young, ibid., p. 25.

[14] Ibid., p. 26.

[15] Ibid., pp. 26–27.

[16] Maluleke, op. cit. (note 2), p. 17.

[17] Young, op. cit. (note 4), p. 3.

mainline traditions and the world of African traditional religion."[18] This phase of African theology still saw the African as a communitarian being, although other aspects of African culture were put under severe scrutiny. A good example is how personhood played itself out in African women's theologies.

The absence of children in African womanist theology

One major thrust of this second phase was the elevation of the status of the African woman with the emergence of African womanist theologies. Many male African theologians were convinced by their female counterparts that they had neglected women's concerns in their earlier work.[19] At different stages of this development, African women theologians such as Mercy Oduyoye, Musimbi Kanyoro, Nyambura Njoroge and Isabel Phiri emerged as leading figures in this movement. Phiri shows how the emergence of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the "Circle") highlighted the marginalization of women within African theology and opened a space for doing theology as women in Africa.[20] The methodology of African women theologians involved appropriating African culture, "upholding" it where it was of value and changing it where it was oppressive. "This means that whatever things uphold women's and men's humanity in the Bible, in African Traditional Religion, and in African culture are sources for this theology."[21] Thus, African personhood meant taking the concerns of African women more seriously.

While this perspective makes sense in a context where women are marginalized by men and society, it does not raise the pertinent concern of the marginalization of children within that same society. Even when Phiri addresses the "initiation of girls," she quickly moves on to women, most of whom are now "able to identify positive elements which give African women

[18] Cornel du Toit, "Issues in the Reconstruction of African Theology: African Hermeneutics as Key to Understanding the Dynamics of African Theology," in Joanne Marie Greer and David O. Moberg (eds), *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion,* vol. 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 38. Maluleke, op. cit. (note 2), p. 14. See in particular, Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983).

[19] See Sanneh, ibid., pp. 22–26, and also Maluleke, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 20–22.

[20] Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Doing Theology in Community: The Case of African Women Theologians in the 1990s," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 99 (November 1997), pp. 68–76.

[21] Ibid., pp. 70–71.

their cultural identity."[22] As a result, the plight of girls and boys only became an entrance into the discussion about African theology for adults.

Nyambura Njoroge helps us to see why children are among the missing voices in African Christian thought.[23] Njoroge points to the fact that for almost three decades, African theology was articulated solely by men. She therefore praises the pioneering female voices of such luminaries as Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who was among the first to point to the lack of prominence women in the biblical and ecclesial traditions. Njoroge accuses African male theologians of having tried to develop an African theology "without taking into account women's lived experience," and concludes that such a project was "gender blind."[24] Culture and patriarchy have perpetuated the subjugation of women. The construction of personhood is primarily gendered. She does not, however, go on to name the absence of children in African theological reflection.

For a number of reasons, the emergence of African womanist theology could have led to the emergence of child sensitive African theological reflection. First, African women theologians claimed that their contributions were comprehensive and inclusive, seeking to ensure that African theology "would be allowed to fly with two wings."[25] Even though their aim had been to promote "African women's theologies,"[26] they did not seek to isolate themselves from their male counterparts. In her opening words at the 1989 Accra conference of African women theologians, Oduyoye challenged African women theologians to make vital contributions to truly African theological expressions.[27] The book, *Women Hold Up Half The Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa,* captures this spirit well.[28] By unearthing the role women played in the history of the Anglican Church in South Africa,

[22] Ibid., p. 71.

[23] Nyambura Jane Njoroge, "The Mission Voice: African Women Doing Theology," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa,* op. cit. (note 20), pp. 77–83.

[24] Ibid., p. 80.

[25] A metaphor coined by Oduyoye that refers to the developing partnership between African female and male theologians forging a common and comprehensive African theological expression, Nyambura Jane Njoroge, "N. J. Talitha Cum! To the New Millennium: A Conclusion," in Nyambura Jane Njoroge and Musa W. Dube (eds), *Talitha Cum: Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001), p. 247.

[26] Phiri, op. cit. (note 20), pp. 152, 154.

[27] Moiseraele Prince Dibeela, "A Setswana Perspective on Genesis 1:1-10," in Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (eds), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

[28] Denise Ackermann, Jonathan A. Draper and Emma Mashinini (eds), *Women Hold Up Half The Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1991).

their contribution to life was being affirmed. The fact that men and women contributed to the book revived the complementary and communitarian dream. This conciliatory atmosphere was consistent with the ideals of a traditional communitarian ethos upon which earlier African theological reflection built. The aim was to see African men and women together in community. But African community cannot be without children.

The "Circle," as utilized by African women theologians, is a multifaceted and potent symbol of self-understanding with its roots in traditional African religious thought. The emerging network became the "Circle" as a way of describing "African women theologians in various contexts, methods and concerns, who work together for the empowerment of women and the recognition of human dignity." Its "interconnectedness" signified "life as a continuous flowing force."[29] This was the original communitarian understanding of personhood upon which earlier male African theologians had based their work. Whether or not African women theologians were aware of this is unclear. I surmise that they found the communitarian ideal in harmony with their project and did not question its reality as descriptive of the African person.

Secondly, African women's theology, like other feminist theologies, could have adopted the children's agenda as its own without compromising its own concerns. I here risk being chided for suggesting that African womanist theology mimics Western feminist theological trends, which it had already partly rejected.[30] However, African women theologians are committed to "speaking up on issues that diminish life."[31] One would have hoped that with such pointed cultural "re-visioning" of African theology, the plight of children would have come to the fore. Elsewhere some feminist theologians have focused more on children.[32]

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[29] Phiri, op. cit. (note 20), p. 155. A closer reading of this expression resonates fully with the earlier description of the African communitarian ethos by Placide Tempels on whom early African scholars had extensively drawn.

[30] Western feminist theology provided the earlier working tools for African women theologians. Even though they reclaimed their own space of struggle as defined by the postcolonial, economic and social conditions in Africa, the struggles of most African womanist theologians are not the same as other more marginalized African women. They also need to take seriously the indigenous means African women use in their struggles against oppression.

[31] Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the 21st Century," in Njoroge and Dube, op. cit. (note 25), p. 176.

[32] E.g., Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "'Let the Children Come' Revisited: Contemporary Feminist Theologians on Children," in Marcia JoAnn Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 446.

Some African women theologians do mention children in relation to women's concerns.[33] At first sight, Musa Dube's chapter title, "Little Girl, Get Up,"[34] gives the impression that it has to do with children, i.e., girls. This view is especially implied in the subtitle, "The Girl Child." Yet, what begins as a potential engagement with the plight of the girls changes after seven short sentences to a focus on women.

By no means do I want to trivialize the focus on gender in doing African theology. Gender remains an important cultural challenge in many aspects of the development of Africa. My contention, however, is that gender concerns are only a part of the wider problem in the construal of the African person. The communitarian construction of the African person, which African womanist theologians have apparently appropriated uncritically, seems counterproductive. The fact that communitarianism pervades African idealism in African philosophy, sociology and theology does not change this contention. African communitarianism needs to be more nuanced if it is to be a useful category of analysis.

Communitarian conceptions of African personhood

Although many aspects that previously characterized the traditional African outlook on life's "community and wholeness" are disintegrating, the presupposition still holds that African societies are communitarian.[35] The communitarian thesis has persisted even in recent African theological reflection. For example, in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, one can clearly see how the communitarian understanding seems to pervade the African understanding of what it means to be a person in Africa. Justin Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics (also used by African women theologians) are based on the basic African conceptions of reality,

> the unitive view of reality whereby reality is seen not as composed of matter and spirit, sacred and profane but as a unity with visible and invisible aspects, the divine origin of the universe and the interconnectedness between God,

[33] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 61.

[34] Musa Dube, "Little Girl, Get Up," in Njoroge and Dube, op. cit. (note 25), pp. 1–24.

[35] See, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Cleveland OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 33; Jan Hermlink, "The New Africa and an Old Imperative," in *Lutheran World* 5, no. 4 (1959), p. 350.

> humanity and the cosmos, and the sense of community whereby a person's identity is defined in terms of belonging to a community.[36]

In the same volume, Solomon Avotri sees "aspects of the New Testament, such as emphasis on community, which resonate with African culture."[37] Reading Genesis 1:1–10 from the Setswana perspective, Dibeela is categorical and almost nostalgic about African communitarian cosmology.

> The approach [to land ownership] was of communal ownership. As a result it was regarded as anathema for an individual or group or individuals to claim sole ownership of land to the exclusion of others […]. I believe Setswana religious believe [*sic*] has an even richer understanding of the concept of land. Batswana believe that the land is the abode of the Living Dead of the Ancestors. As such, it must not be desecrated. We desecrate our land by spilling blood onto it. Such irreligious behaviour results in infertility of land, veld fires, drought and other calamities. To restore our relationship to the earth would normally require a ritual which would involve a cleansing of the community […]. Such cleansing restores broken relations between peoples within the community, between human community and the environment as well as between creation and the divine.[38]

Another scholar from Botswana, Gomang Seratwa Ntloedibe, emphasizes the communitarian view.

> In socially interdependent society of the Batswana, the survival of the whole community is, therefore, endangered by individual antisocial behaviour […]. According to Setswana beliefs, the greatest good for all can be achieved if all live according to the basic virtue of harmony, between people and nature, ancestors and Modimo.[39]

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[36] Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in West and Dube, op. cit. (note 27), p. 24.

[37] Solomon K. Avotri, "The Vernacularisation of Scripture and African Beliefs: The Story of the Gerasene Demoniac among the Ewe of West Africa," in West and Dube, ibid., pp. 315–6.

[38] Moiseraele Prince Dibeela, "A Setswana Perspective on Genesis 1:1–10," in West and Dube, ibid., p. 395.

[39] Gomang Seratwa Ntloedibe, "*Ngaka* and Jesus as Liberators: A Comparative Reading," in West and Dube, ibid., p. 500; cf. Temba L. J. Mafico, "The Biblical God of the Fathers and the African Ancestors," in West and Dube, ibid., p. 488.

In this construction, the "notions of consciousness begin with an holistic understanding of the human condition."[40] These can be articulated in three categories: (1) the spiritual nature of human beings; (2) the interconnectedness of all things; and (3) oneness of mind, body and spirit. While this is usually represented in the familiar African adage *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person because of other people), this construction sees individuals only in relationship to the entire community and the world of nature. According to Mbiti, a prominent proponent of the communitarian ethos,

> [i]n traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He [*sic*] owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He [*sic*] is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group […]. Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am." This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man [*sic*].[41]

It is from this perspective of community that an individual becomes a person. As suggested by Nhlanhla Mkhize and others, "apart from" community "personhood is almost inconceivable."[42] In other words, communitarian life guarantees one's attainment of personhood. Theo Sundermeier suggests that this notion developed from the various myths of origins that understand particular communities as originating from the same source.[43] Thus, for example, the Zulu myth understands all Zulu people as emerging from a single reed or *uhlanga* and thereby belonging to an *uhlanga* collective. The African communitarian ethos thus determines the basic understanding of the person. Other extreme versions of this understanding hold that individualism "and self-seeking [are] ruled out […]. The personal pronoun 'I'

[40] Roy Moodley and William West, *Integrating Traditional Healing Practices into Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers, 2005), p. 212.

[41] Mbiti, op. cit. (note 10), pp. 108–9.

[42] Nhlanhla Mkhize, "Psychology: An African Perspective," in Derek Hook (ed.), *Critical Psychology* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2004), p. 49.

[43] Theo Sundermeier, *The Individual and Community in African Traditional Religions* (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1998), pp. 17–18.

[is] used very rarely in public assemblies. The spirit of collectivism [is] (so) much ingrained in the minds of the African people."[44]

Accordingly, there is an interdependence and harmony where "people, animals, and environment exchange their strength, and are in relationship of osmosis."[45] Here the natural world is seen as the "extension" of the African self. In this "African worldview, there is no gap between the self and the phenomenal world. One is simply an extension of the other."[46] Community is thus not only between humans but also between humans and the world of nature in which they live. Citing Dixon, Harding states that in the African worldview, there is

> [a] narrowing of perceived conceptual distance between the observer and the observed. The observed is perceived to be placed so close to the individual that it obscures what lies beyond it, and so that the observer cannot escape responding to it. The individual also appears to view the "field" as itself responding to him; i.e., although it may be completely objective and inanimate to others, because it demands response it is accorded a kind of life of its own.[47]

According to Geoffrey Parrinder, the "material and spiritual are intertwined, the former as a vehicle of the latter."[48] Harding concludes that once the relationship between the person and nature is disturbed, the well-being of the person is also disturbed. This creates a balance which must be maintained since any "disequilibrium may result in troubles such as human illness, drought, or social disruption."[49] Humans must find ways of tapping into the world of nature of which they are part. According to this understanding, when people interact with the spirit world they are not trying to bridge the gap between humankind and nature, but firmly to connect with the vitality of this nature to which they have an ongoing

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[44] Kenyatta cited in Kwame Gyeke, "Person and Community in African Thought," in Pieter Hendrik Coetzee and Abraham P. J. Roux (eds), *The African Philosophy Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 298.

[45] Theo Sundermeier, op. cit. (note 43), p. 18; Oduyoye, op. cit. (note 35), p. 33.

[46] Sandra Harding, "The Curious Coincidence of Feminine and African Moralities," in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *African Philosophy: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 368.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: SPCK, 1968), p. 27.

[49] Harding, op. cit. (note 46), p. 363.

relationship. This "universe is not static, inanimate, or 'dead'; it is dynamic, animate, living, and powerful universe."[50]

The weakness of this understanding lies in the assumption that Africans live in an egalitarian and harmonious community with one another, living or dead, and with the world of nature and gods, even though many African theologians who hold to this claim lead very individualistic lives. Their interaction with African tradition is like cultural tourism. They have lived or live in Europe and North America and rarely live in harmony with nature. They have become consumerist Westerners with African skins. Why, therefore, this fascination with the communitarian understanding? Before answering this question, we need to trace the origins of the communitarian African person. While the notion of communitarian personhood draws heavily on Mbiti and other first-generation African theologians, a deeper investigation will reveal that it did not originate with Africans.

The inadequacy of the communitarian ethos

In order to appreciate the insufficiency of the communitarian ethos as descriptive of all people in Africa, one must first look at how personhood is attained and maintained. In Africa, personhood is attained through particular, predetermined challenges. Individual agency and ingenuity outside one's socially determined space is not encouraged, although it cannot be completely controlled. From the communitarian perspective, children—especially those who have not yet reached adolescence—are unable to meet these challenges, and thus are not recognized as persons in their own right. It is worth noting that in referring to the communitarian ethos, Oduyoye classifies children together with the "aged, strangers, the sick and the needy, widows, disabled and others," in other words, members of the African community needing "help."[51] This view is patently unhelpful.

One African scholar who has related African childhood to African cosmology, especially in Ghana, is Stephan Miescher.[52] He notes that, as children grow up, one of their major tasks is to learn about the centrality

[50] Ibid.

[51] Oduyoye, op. cit. (note 35), p. 34.

[52] Stephan F. Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). Interestingly, there are few, if any, African theologians attempting such work.

of adults and their role in advising and guiding the child.[53] Children are closer to their grandparents who tell them stories which reinforce obedience.[54] This marginalization of children in the African communitarian ethos is sometimes rationalized by using the language of "care" and "protection," while the real value of childhood is not recognized.[55] It is not surprising then that during a lecture I heard one gender activist say that, "women are not children; they are also people." At a subconscious level, the African construal of personhood denigrates childhood to a subnormal class, albeit a subnormality we should live with. African theology has followed a similar trend, whereby its early proponents viewed community in Africa as being more "Christian" than Western individualism. The marginalization of children in the church, for example in the Eucharist, demonstrates that children are thought of as not being human enough to receive this sacrament. Such practices reveal an hierarchical rather than a communitarian personhood in Africa. People and nature in community form a pyramid, rather than a circle.

Why such fascination with communitarian personhood?

Why is this ideal of communitarian personhood so important for African theologians? Early African theologians teamed up with Western missionaries to defend how African culture had been disparaged through colonialism. But apart from these good intentions, Western missionaries were also looking for new theological frontiers, having come from a context where Christianity was being challenged by the Enlightenment and emerging secularism. The African frontier was fascinating because it still possessed the vestiges of primal religion, which constituted the earlier life of the now "civilized" Westerners. The first generation of African theologians served as field workers for Western theologians. So, while communitarian personhood gave Westerners a glimpse of their own lost past, the community with nature confirmed their assumption that early religious expressions were animistic. Western theologians in the form of missionaries would

[53] Ibid., p. 17.

[54] Ibid., pp. 17–18. Children are closer to their grandparents because they are not yet full beings and grandparents are about to attain the highest personhood (ancestorhood), which hopefully can rub off on the children.

[55] Pieter Hendrik Coetzee, *The African Philosophy Reader: A Text with Readings* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 325.

produce an African ethno-theology and African theologians would echo it by providing concrete examples from their own community. In so doing, African theologians would be employable in Western universities where they would continue to echo the Westerners' perception of the African.

For the present generation of African theologians, the concept of communitarian personhood provides an advantage for competing in global theological discourse. Communitarian personhood is offered as that which makes the African different, in fact superior, to the individualistic and lonely Westerner. This is simply a way of redefining and redrawing the boundaries of the discourse. In an era where Westerners are guilty of individualistic practices that threaten the sustainability of life on the planet, the African who has an harmonious relationship with nature and lives in community with other persons is the ideal person, albeit in "underdeveloped" situations. The Africans can be admired for the primal existence they have maintained, but are to be pitied for being "underdeveloped" by Western standards. Western donors support many research projects purporting to use African approaches to restoring the planet.

All this is an illusion because Africans are no longer communitarian, if ever they were. If the African was communitarian before, that community was not the one used by African theologians to do African theology. The African person was and is an hierarchical person.

Hierarchical constructions of personhood in Africa

Personhood is understood to refer to those "attributes, capacities, and signs […] of what it means 'properly' to be a social person in a particular society."[56] Herdt points out that such constructions are ideological in that these "attributes, capacities, and signs" "may be imposed (or denied), in whole or in part, not only on particular human actors but also categories of collectivities of human actors or nonhuman entities."[57] As has already been shown, early African personhood construction was predominantly male dominated and thus denied full personhood to women. Herdt thus shows that in many patriarchal societies, only males are considered to have the capacity to "attain complete personhood," the ultimate sign of personhood

[56] Gilbert H. Herdt (ed.), *Rituals of Manhood: Male Initiation in Papua New Guinea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 103.

[57] Ibid.

being the attainment of male ancestorhood. In this hierarchical construction, personhood

> [is] acquired along an evolution undertaken over an entire lifetime, of which ancestorhood represents the culmination. It is not attained at birth, but through the fulfillment of a number of requirements which include procreation in marriage, and reproduction through the procreation of one's own children.[58]

In addition to procreation, full personhood is attained by discharging one's duties to one's immediate family, "the senior generations and the deceased forebears." Arlette Ottino observes that

> the progression of the individual to the state of personhood is a common feature of hierarchically ordered societies, in which identity cannot be separated from the attributes attached to the position and the functions of the person within society, at successive stages in life.[59]

The hierarchical conception that persists in many African societies today seems to be more descriptive of African personhood. As this personhood encountered Western influence, it adapted itself to Western individualism so that the networks were maintained in an hierarchy of persons, where individuals would seek individual gains through various forms of patronage.[60] This construction of the African person is the result of the marginalization of women, children and other persons or non-persons at the lower level of the pyramid structure.

It is this construction of personhood that informs African theological reflection, which excluded not only women and children, but all those considered as not being fully human, such as the physically or mentally disabled or those considered "different." This construction influences how African theology engages with current ethical debates on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. When President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe said that homosexuals are worse than dogs, he was using the scale of personhood

[58] Arlette Ottino, *The Universe Within a Balinese Village Through its Ritual Practices* (Paris: Karthala, 2000), p. 274.

[59] Ibid., p. 275.

[60] The full scale of this can be seen today in various corrupt engagements between African élites and their Western counterparts. The cultural roots of this practice that has largely contributed to the underdevelopment of Africa need to be more fully explored.