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African Hyphenated Christians - an Alternate Model of Theologizing in Africa

C.B. PETER
Moi University, Kenya

I

A few years ago I had the privilege of reading two brilliant articles by the current director of CWME, WCC and my former teacher, Professor Christopher Duraisingh. The series bore the general title, "Indian Hyphenated Christians and Theological Reflections" (Duraisingh 1979, 1980). Duraisingh in these articles rightly argued to look at the phenomenon of the emergence of indigenous theology in India as a process of critical self-awareness by Indian-Christians. He further noted that the shaping of the Indian Christian ethos was doubly determined by a confluence of the Judaeo-Christian traditions on the one hand, and the Pan-Indian traditions on the other. The author maintained further that these two traditions are single and complete wholes, best designated by a hyphen (Duraisingh 1980: 98).

The above refreshing approach inspired me to publish an article entitled, "Israel and Her Neighbours: An Analogy to understand the Shaping of the Indian Christian Ethos" (Peter 1983), in which I sought to analyse the core values of Judaeo-Christian and Pan-Indian traditions in a bid to understand what really has gone into the shaping of the Indian Christian ethos.

In this paper I am inspired once again by Duraisingh's approach and model of understanding indigenous theologies in terms of a critical self-awareness by the indigenous Christians. My arena this time is African theology.[1]

II

Professor John S. Mbiti of Kenya, way back in 1979, after surveying some three hundred published papers and books in the general area of African theology, in preparation for his article, issued the following warning:

> Some of us are getting tired of seeing all sorts of articles and references under the big banner: AFRICAN THEOLOGY (or some similar

[1] By 'African theology' I mean in this article African Christian theology, i.e. theology constructed in an African context on the basis of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as against a theology based on Islamic tradition, for example.

> wording). The substance of these articles often turns out to be advice on how African theology should be done, where it should be done, who should do it, what it should say, ad infinitum. Some of these self-made theological advisors, whether they be African or foreign, have little or nothing to produce beyond their generous advice; and others want to play the role of theological engineers who meticulously sabotage spontaneous theological output by African Christians (Mbiti 1979).

Much as one might argue that Mbiti's warning against 'advisors' - and indeed much of what I have said in this paper - is nothing short of an advice in itself, I would nevertheless agree with his concern that African (or any) theology is not so much a matter of advice as, I think, it is a matter of **understanding** how African-Christians are doing it already - in Duraisingh's terms 'a critical self-awareness by African-Christians', and in Mbiti's terms 'spontaneous theological output by African Christians'.

Following Duraisingh can we say that African Christian ethos (like its Indian counterpart) was also doubly determined by the confluence of two independent traditions - the Pan-African (if one may use this term here) and the Judaeo-Christian?

In a slight departure from the conventional rules about the formats of citations I am quoting below two statements from Duraisingh which I have deliberately tampered with replacing 'Indian' with 'African'.

> My own attempt...tends to confirm the affirmation that the content of memory and imagination of hosts of African-Christians is **doubly determined** or **co-constituted** by the simultaneous operation of two traditions (Duraisingh 1979: 96).

He goes on to argue:

> If, in fact these two traditions are in a **constitutive** relationship in the formation of all that which is African-Christian then I propose that it is the term 'African **Hyphenated** Christians' that describes more accurately our self-identity. We are not simply Africans who also happen to be Christians; nor are we Christians who, by accident of birth, happen to be also Africans. We are African-Christians, **hyphenated wholes** wherein both the components of our complex heritage are in a holistic and coalescing relation (Duraisingh 1979: 97).

The argument in the above statements runs so smoothly that it is difficult to see that they have, in any way, been tampered with. But before discussing the above approach further I should like to take stock briefly of the current state of African theology.

III

What are some of the modes of theologizing currently prevalent in Africa? Mbiti looks at African theology in three ways: written theology (academic), oral theology (grassroots), and symbolic theology (art forms) (Mbiti 1979: 84). Roughly corresponding to Mbiti's analysis are Father Charles Nyamiti's three 'schools' of African theology: the speculative school (systematic and philosophical), the socio-biblical school (dealing with sociological and ethnological questions), and the reactionary school (e.g. the South African type of Black theology) (Nyamiti 1973: 1). Obviously, the emphasis seems to be on the 'written theology' (Mbiti), or the 'speculative school' (Nyamiti). Africans and non-Africans are busily engaged in publishing articles and books on African theology.[2]

Various contemporary approaches to African theology seem to revolve around the following basic concerns:

A. There is a battle of words to entitle African theology. Should it be called 'African theology', or 'African Christian theology', or 'Christian African theology', or '**Theologia Africana**', or 'Theologizing in Africa', or some other fancy name (Mbiti 1979: 83; 1971: 195)? Despite warnings from J.K. Agbeti (Agbeti 1972: 6), Philip Turner (Turner 1971: 64-65), and J.R.W. Stott[3] that the term 'African theology' could be misleading since it connotes the pre-Christian (Agbeti), or even anti-Christian paganistic concepts of Cod in Africa (Turner and Stott), scholars like John S. Mbiti (Mbiti 1979: 83), Gabriel M. Setiloane (Setiloane 1979), John Pobee (Pobee 1987: 29-35), Charles Nyamiti (Nyamiti 1973), Gwinyai H. Muzorewa (Muzorewa 1985), and Desmond M. Tutu (Tutu 1987: 46-55) have, for their own good reasons, continued to call it 'African theology'. Harry Sawyerr has used both 'African theology' (Sawyerr 1987: 12-26) as well as its Latinized counterpart '**Theologia Africana**'(ibid. pp. 21-26) to describe the subject. Others

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2 For a bibliography of some 280 writings on African theology in English and French by both Catholic and Protestant scholars covering the period from 1970 to 1979 see A. Ngindu Mushete (1983: 93-95). Kwesi A. Dickson of Ghana has listed a bibliography of some 159 works consisting of 83 books, 3 Conference Papers, and 73 articles in his *Theology in Africa* (1984: 229-37). Gwinyai H. Muzorewa has furnished a 323 title strong bibliography in his *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (1985: 131-42). John Parratt of Botswana has provided a useful annotated bibliography of some 26 Books, articles, and reports in his *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (1987). The American A.I.C. Scholars of Kenya Richard J. Gehman has listed a bibliography of some 150 writings relating to African theology covering a vast period from 1922 to 1985 in his *Doing African Christian Theology: An Evangelical Perspective* (1987: 119-29). On pp. 28-38 of the above work Gehman has provided a critical review of literature on African theology from an Evangelical perspective. Finally, John Mbiti's article "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology" contains a critical discussion of some 50 African and non-African works on African theology.

3 J.R.W. Stott in an exclusive interview with J.N.K. Mugambi, November 1973. See J.N.K. Mugambi, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (1989; reprint 1990), p. 3 (page reference is to reprint edition).

like Aylward Shorter (Shorter 1986), John Parratt (Parrat, ed. 1987), Richard J. Gehman (Gehman 1987), J.N.K. Mugambi (Mugambi 1990: 10) and Emeka Onwurah (Onwurah 1988: 5-19) seem to have heeded the warning and gone on to opt for the more precise title 'African Christian theology'. Interestingly, John Parratt, though entitling his book *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, seems to have later lapsed into calling his subject 'African theology' in his Table of Contents.[4] Kwesi A. Dickson has opted for a cautious title *Theology in Africa* for his book (Dickson 1984), while Osadolor Imasogie seems to be even more cautious while calling his book *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (Imasogie 1983).

Since a critical discussion of the above issue falls somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, I have presently opted for the simple expression 'African theology' to describe the subject mainly because I have made use of John Mbiti's definition of this term (Mbiti 1979: 83).

B. Then there is an apologetic concern. The post-colonial and politically independent African Christianity has come of age and why should it not have its own theology? There is a concern to wean Christian theology away from the Western breast and feed it on African porridge so that it may be nourished in a local context. The African Christianity thus seems to be in a genuine quest for selfhood and authenticity.

The above concern appears to be quite paramount among Catholic theologians. It is expressed in such terms as 'Africanisation' and 'indigenisation' of theology (see, for example, Onwurah 1988: 16), and the famous 'adaptation versus incarnation' debate in the Roman Synod in 1974.[5] The underlying idea here is that of 'suitability'. How can the 'given' Christian truth be tailored to **suit** the African cultural ethos?[6] Aylward Shorter has seen African Christian theology emerging only out of a 'dialogue' of Christian theology with African traditional religions.[7] Such a 'dialogical theology' would, in turn, lead to such trends as 'cultural theology' and 'liturgical theology' within the broader arena of African theology (Parratt 1987: 7-9).

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4 See, especially, his conclusion.

5 Aylward Shorter has discussed this at some length. See his *African Christian Theology*, Ch. 11 *et Passim* and Ch. IX "Adaptation or Incarnation?"

6 In the context of Indian Christian theology this issue was critically addressed to by the American indologist Prof. David C. Scott in his article *Worship in An Indian Christian Ethos*, **India Cultures** (38)3: 8-19, (1983).

7 Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, Ch. 1 "Meeting African Traditional Religion," 5-19 *et passim*. See also Mushete's article "The History of Theology in Africa: From Polemics to Critical Irenics", in *African Theology En Route*, 26-30. Fashole-Luke regards the task of African theology as 'translating' the Christian faith in the African context. See his "The Quest for African Christian Theologies" in *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies*, G.H. Anderson and T.F. Stransky (eds.), pp. 139-41.

C. Finally, there is a normative/homilitical concern in African theology which, in turn, is expressed in two ways: ecumenical and evangelical. On the ecumenical front African theology takes up a political-activist role with liberation currents (e.g. the South African type of Black theology).

Though José P. Chipenda feels that theology was unable to liberate Africa,[8] it would appear that his contention is oriented to a Marxist type of social analysis in which matter generates idea and not **vice versa**. However, as studies by Max Weber tended to show the co-determinacy of matter and idea,[9] there is, in my opinion, justification for believing that behind the armed struggle for political liberation in South African countries there was a value system provided by the South African type of liberation theology.

Look, for example, at the following powerful reconstruction of the Lord's Prayer by the Reverend Canaan Banana under the title "The Lord's Prayer in the Ghetto":

> Our Father which art in the ghetto,
> Degraded is your name.
> Thy servitude abounds,
> Thy will is mocked,
> As pie in the sky.
> Teach us to demand,
> Our share of gold,
> Forgive us our docility,
> As we demand our share of justice.
> Lead us not into complicity,
> Deliver us from our fears.
> For ours is thy soverignity
> The power and the liberation
> For ever and ever..., Amen.[10]

Now, if such a prayer is given to the people, and they start praying it with all the sincerity of their hearts, it is hard to imagine them not rising up in arms against their oppressors.

On the evangelical front the normative/homilitical concern is expressed in the 'spiritual' mode - personal salvation of individual souls to go to heaven and awaiting a glorious return of our Lord. It was this prime normative concern which prompted the late Dr. Byang H. Kato to "describe and reject" African theology since he feared it might pave the way for such trends as syncretism and

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8 Chipenda states: "Recent history has taught us that theology was unable to liberate Africa. Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bisau achieved their liberation through armed struggle." (Chipenda 1979: 67)

9 For a sympathetic biblical critique of Max Weber, see Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh*, 1979.

10 Canaan Banana, *The Gospel According to the Ghetto*. Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1981:1.

universalism which in his opinion were detrimental to the spiritual growth of African Christianity (Kato 1975: 53-68). Recently, the Africa Inland Church scholar Richard J. Gehman has made a remarkable attempt of practicalising African Christian theology in terms of 'doing' it for the spiritual growth of the African Church. Both Kato and Gehman have concluded their works with a set of guidelines (or 'proposals') to follow.[11]

IV

From the foregoing discussion two things seem to become evident. First, the advisory character of African theology is quite prominent as seen above from the theologians' concern of defining African theology, defending it, and finally dociling it to serve a particular purpose. How the three goals are to be realized is a matter of advice. I have already discussed the 'guideline' type of the model of theologising in Africa as espoused by the evangelical theologians Byang H. Kato and Richard J. Gehman.

Other names also, like those of Osadolor Imasogie[12] and Tite Tienou, could be added to the list. The latter in his booklet *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa* has used military terminology in talking of a 'theological strategy' (Tienou 1982: 43-54). However, "these self-made theological advisors", to borrow Mbiti's epithet (see Mbiti 1979), are plenty on both sides of the fence. The Catholic bishop P.A. Kalilombe has concluded his article "Self-Reliance of the Christian Church" with 'concluding suggestions' (Kalilombe 1979: 55-57). Professor Gabriel M. Setiloane has advised us on 'Future Tasks' (Setiloane 1979: 64-65). The Reverend Jose P. Chipenda has talked of Theological Guidelines' (Chipenda 1979: 69-72). And Bishop T. Tshibangu has ended his paper with his advice on 'Tasks to be Undertaken' (Tshibangu 1979: 76-78).

Secondly, African theology, like other theologies, predominantly remains an intellectual exercise. Indeed it seems to have become 'a theology of theologians, by theologians, for theologians', instead of becoming 'a theology of the people, by the people, for the people'. J.N.K. Mugambi has quoted J.K. Agbeti to the effect that "A theology is not technically 'theology' when the experience of God has not been **systematically, critically**, and **scholarly** interpreted or articulated" (Agbeti 1972: 7; quoted in Mugambi 1990: 10). Tshibangu would readily agree with Agbeti and say, "Theology is actually a scientific act of commitment" (Tshibangu 1979: 73). As mentioned above, Nyamiti also has correctly identified a strong 'speculative' current within African theology (Nyamiti 1973: 1).

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[11] See Kato's "A Ten Point Proposal" in his *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 1975: 181-84 and Gehman's four proposals in his *Doing African Christian Theology*, 1987: 90-102.

[12] *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa*. Note his conclusion, "It is hoped that if these guidelines [italics mine] are taken seriously by theologians in Africa, the African Christians will come to appropriate Christ as the universal saviour..." (Imasogie 1983: 85).

I would think that the 'speculativisation' of theology may be traced back to the Middle Ages and before when the same person would be both the theologian as well as the philosopher. Examples of this 'two-in-one' model may be found in Anselm, Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, Schleiermacher, and so on. Theology was regarded as 'the Queen of Sciences' (Pailin 1989: 123), and its major task was speculative. A speculative '**theos+logos**' type of definition of theology has been an old time favourite approach and is still in use (Mugambi 1990: 7).

How much the above scientific, systematic, and speculative reconstruction of African theology will be relevant and useful to common women and men on African streets is another question. Indeed it would be the irony of ironies if an 'incarnational' model of African theology is contrived first by castigating Western symbols and concepts, and then adopting the Western scientific system to present it. What good will such a model do to the common African people anyway except that they will look at it and blink in awe and amazement (and also amusement) the way they would look at the American Test Tube Baby or the Japanese robot? It is perhaps in this light that Muzorewa asserts that African theology does not **have** to be systematic, and laments, "African theologians do traditional theology descriptively more often than reflectively" (Muzorewa 1985: 83). He goes on to elaborate his idea of 'reflection':

> The Africans differ from non-Africans in their culture more than anything else, and one's method of thinking (Reflection) is influenced more than anything else by one's culture (Muzorewa 1985: 84).

Even old soldiers like Kwesi Dickson seem to have been duly aware of this pitfall. With a light-hearted air of amused disapproval Dickson has described theology as follows:

> ...for the uninitiated, whether Christian or non-Christian, the word 'theology' is intimidating. It conjures up visions of learned debates and abstruse dissertations on Christian belief, often seemingly calculated to mystify rather than to enlighten (Dickson 1984: 13).

A year after Dickson uttered these words in print, a voice crying in the wilderness of South Africa was heard:

> Theology has been thought off, for far too long, as a highly specialized and abstract study reserved for academic experts. Even students of theology have not been taught to do theology themselves; they have generally been taught to read and study what the experts have said (Institute for Third World Theology, 1985: 7).

Without adding any more beads to the above string of quotations, if we can accept Bishop Tshibangu's definition of theology as "the science dealing with the divine destiny of humanity" (Tshibangu 1979: 73) or Mbiti's definition of African

theology as "theological reflection and expression by African Christians" (Mbiti 1979: 83), then there will be sufficient justification for the 'despeculativisation' of theology and regarding African theology as a critical self-awareness by African-Christians.

Now, if the above can be true then theological methodology will be seen in a sort of reversed focus. So far it has been the theologians's task to 'do' theology. Even in such models as 'people's theology' or 'doing theology' it is primarily the theologian who 'does' theology for the people, or, alternatively, 'advises' them how to 'do' it. But in the model I have suggested above it is the **people's** task to 'do' theology, and the theologian's task is to **understand** and scientifically interpret how people are doing it and what are its implications. Indeed it will do well to realize that African theology is not really a task ahead of theologians. Rather the African people are **doing** theology already. They started doing it ever since they believed in the Gospel. They may, or may not be aware of it, but they are doing it all the same. It is this realization which moved Kwesi Dickson to begin his masterpiece *Theology in Africa* with the "melodramatic" statement, "Every Christian theologises" (Dickson 1984, 13ff), Dickson's pregnant thought can be heard reverberating in South Africa a year later:

> Any practising Christian can **do** theology.
> We say **do** theology and not study theology.
> Anyone who is genuinely trying to live as
> a Christian can theologize about his/her
> **faith** (Institute for Third World Theology 1985: 7).

Furthermore, if African people can be seen as the true authors, doers and subjects of their theology rather than the objects of theology done by theologians, then other implications will follow. First, it will have to be realized that common people are not trained in theological methodology. Rather, they use their own methodology. The theologian's task will, therefore, be to understand the **people's** methodology of doing theology within the vast homogenous (?) African milieu (Sawyerr 1987: 25) as well as in various local heterogenous contexts. Secondly, it will have to be realized that people do theology not only as a voluntary endeavour but also (and mostly) as a subconscious and spontaneous process. This was my contention in my article "Israel and her Neighbours" in which I tried to see the shaping of the religious ethos of the ancient Israelites and later of the Judaeo-Christian people as a confluence of Hebraic, Egyptian, Canaanite, Mesopotamian, and later, Christian traditions in a subconscious and spontaneous process of indigenisation which took centuries to shape up and is continuing to shape and re-shape itself (Peter 1983: 32-39).

It seems that Aylward Shorter had something similar in mind when he talked of African theology in terms of a 'dialogical theology'. This dialogue, Shorter argued, takes place within the consciousness of African-Christians (between traditional Christian and traditional African values) (Shorter 1986: 18). He is right

in regarding this dialogue essentially as "non-verbal" as "it can only take place through mutual participation in experience (Shorter 1986: 8).[13] He has rightly regarded this dialogue as "a social phenomenon" and has made reference to Marshall Murphree's description of this social phenomenon as "dialectical interchange" (Shorter 1986: 15). Shorter, however, seems to have eventually settled for a conscious and voluntary model of doing a dialogical theology.[14]

V

This leads us to the question: Just **how** can African theologians fulfil their task of **understanding** of African people's process o£ doing theology? In my opinion this will require several steps. First, it will require African theology to be firmly welded with social sciences in an African context - especially the disciplines of sociology and cultural anthropology.[15] Secondly, African theology will have to be studied no longer in terms of syncretism, or adaptation, or even incarnation of the Christian tradition in the context of the African tradition but in a close liaison with African traditional religions. As mentioned earlier, African Christians, down through the centuries have inherited these two sets of traditions (African and Christian) and their religious ethos has been shaped and continuously is being re-shaped by a confluence of this bipartite system of values. A significant case in point is the rapid mushrooming of the so called African Independent Churches all over the continent which are tangible illustrations of the African people's way of doing theology in an ever-continuing process of the confluence of the Judaeo-Christian and African traditional values in the religious consciousness of African Christians.

Significantly, sociological studies in the phenomenon of African Independent Churches are not lacking. David Barrett's enormous effort may be cited as a strong case in point (Barrett 1968: 94). What is more desirable, however, is a close liaison between the study of this phenomenon and that of African theology. It is heartening to note that African theologians like Kofi Appiah-Kubi (1979: 117-25), Aylward Shorter (1986: 16), Harry Sawyerr (1987: 15-20, 211), John Parratt,[16]

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[13] On experience see also Dickson 1984: 22-24.

[14] See, for example, his last Chapter, "Adaptation or Incarnation," 145ff *et passim*.

[15] Shorter has raised the important question whether the study of human sciences should be regarded as a science or as a humanity (132-33). Also in the Final Communique of the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians held at Accra, Ghana (December 17-23, 1977) African anthropology was included among sources of African theology. See *African Theology En Route*, 192-93.

[16] John Parratt, "Current Issues in African Theology" in his (ed.) *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 147.

Kwesi A. Dickson,[17] and Edward W. Fashole-Luke (1976: 144) have shown due sensitivity towards this issue. The Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians meeting at Accra, Ghana (December 17-23, 1977), in its final communique included African Independent Churches among sources of African theology.[18] This trend needs to be continued with greater emphasis in the light of my proposed model of understanding African theology as a critical self-awareness by African-Christians whose religious ethos was, and continues to be, shaped by the confluence of the two independent sets of value-systems - African and Christian.

Talking of a confluence of values, the significance of the study of the phenomenon of socio-cultural change becomes more and more clear - a point, which, happily, did not escape the attention of Aylward Shorter (1986: 9, 140-43) and J.N.K. Mugambi (1990: 5). This phenomenon of rapid socio-cultural change in Africa has been caused by the influx of such trends as modernization, urbanization, and industrialization. This would mean that the two co-constituents of African theology - African and Christians - are in a continuous state of flux. There seems to be an ever-continuing dialectic between the 'given' (Christian dogma and African tradition), and the 'becoming' (rapid cultural transformation in Africa). An interesting case in point is the celebration of the Good Friday in some African countries as a gala festival complete with disco and drinks. Look, for example, at the following pompous advertisement which appeared in the **Daily Nation** (Nairobi) on the Good Friday (March 29) in 1991:

> Can't miss it. The Mother of All Easter Entertainments.
> Dance from **Easter Friday** noon to Saturday morning.
> You will never forget!

When I came across the above advertisement my initial reaction was one of shock, dismay, and hurt. Can we really dance disco all the day and drink a toast to the Son of God who is innocently dying the horrendous death of the Cross for our sins? I found the bare suggestion simply disgusting. Upon a cool reflection, however, several things became clear to me. The Good Friday Disco comprises three elements. First, the very idea of dancing and drinking especially on a Good Friday brings in an element of the Christian tradition. Secondly, the idea of feasting and dancing during the funeral brings in an element of African tradition.[19] And finally, the idea of disco brings in an element of the rapid process of socio-cultural change in Africa through modernization. So, here we can see the wedding between the 'given' and the 'becoming'. This is just one illustration to show the range of topics African theology needs to grapple with.

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[17] Kwesi Dickson, though not making an explicit reference to it, yet gives some implicit consideration to the subject. See his *Theology in Africa*, 1984: 116-20.

[18] See *African Theology En Route*, 192-93.

[19] As, for example, is practised among the Abaluhyo, an ethnic group of the Bantu stock from Western Kenya.

VI

To conclude, then, I may sum up my case once again. In the above pages I have tried to re-define the task of African Theologians in an alternate methodological set-up. First, I have suggested an alternate model to understand African theology as a critical self-awareness by African Christians whose religious ethos as doubly determined by the confluence of the two co-constituent wholes of value-systems (African and Christian) is best designated by a hyphen. Secondly, I have sought to argue that the theologian's task is not to 'do' theology or even to 'advise' on doing it but to **understand** theology as done by the African people. I have further advocated that the study of African theology should be done in close relation with African sociology, African anthropology, African traditional religion, African Independent Churches, and African socio-cultural change. And finally I have submitted that indigenization in Africa (or any) context is not a finished product in any given time in history, but it is an ever continuing process taking place sub-consciously and spontaneously within the religious psyche of African Christians, involving in the current times a wedding between the 'given' (Christian dogma and African tradition) and the 'becoming' (socio-cultural change through rapid modernization).

The following statement from the Final communique of the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians seems fitting to sum up the discussion:

> We believe that African theology must be **understood** in the context of African life and culture and **the creative attempt of African peoples** to shape a new future that is different from the colonial past and the neo-colonial present. The African situation requires a new **theological methodology** that is different from the approaches of the dominant theologies of the west (*African Theology En Route*, p. 11). [italics mine]

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