



Contribution of John S Mbiti to the study of African religions and African theology and philosophy

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Abstract

This paper discusses the contribution of Professor John S Mbiti to African theology and African Philosophy. It does this by highlighting several scholars in various contexts who have attempted to highlight his contribution to these fields of study. The paper highlights some important concepts and issues that Mbiti has dealt with in his theological and philosophical works. The overall argument of these authors is that Mbiti has argued that in their cultures and religions, Africans do know and experience God.

Keywords

African; contribution; culture; Mbiti; philosophy; religion; theology

1. Introduction

The place of Professor John S Mbiti in African theology and African Philosophy is undoubtedly colossal. As it will soon be evident in this paper, several scholars in various contexts have attempted to highlight his contribution to these fields of study. Certainly, this paper does not pretend to exhaust this topic within a short space of time. It only seeks to make a small contribution to the current debate. The objective of this paper is to highlight some important concepts and issues that Mbiti has dealt with in his theological and philosophical works. The paper will attempt to do this through the scholars and our own critical commentary on some of his work.

Having highlighted very briefly the colonial context, we will proceed to deal with the issue under study under the following themes: the Question of African Religions, an African Consciousness in Mbiti, Mbiti's call for serious engagement with the African Context, Mbiti's Stimulation of Academic debate in the study of African Traditional Religions (ATR), his methodological Approach in ATR, Mbiti's concept of An African Ontology, Mbiti's concept of African Ethics and Justice, Mbiti's contribution to Traditional African Spirituality, Mbiti's Concept of Individual immortality, and of course Mbiti's Concept of Time and African beliefs, and Mbiti's contribution to Biblical translations.

2. Colonial context in Africa: 1960–70s

An African identity crisis

In his *Theology and Identity*, Kwame Bediako critically highlighted the dilemma that faced an African in the 1950s and 1960s. He stressed that it was a dilemma that an African faced that was intertwined with the issue of the quest of identity. He put it thus:

It is unfortunate that the quest for an African Christian identity in terms of which are meaningful to African integrity and also adequate for Christian confession, should become so pervasively bedevilled by the missionary enterprise that was instrumental in bringing African Christianity into being, no less than by consequences of the melancholy history of African contact with the Christian peoples of Europe.”¹

Mbiti himself articulated the problem as follows:

Even though attempts are made to give Christianity an African character, its Western form is in many ways foreign to African peoples. This foreignness is a drawback because it means that Christianity is kept on the surface and is not free to deepen its influence in all areas of African life and problems.”²

1 Kwame Bediako, *Theology and African Identity* (Regnum, 1992), 252.

2 John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 185.

Implicit in the issue lay a more critical one, that of identity, specifically with regard to being African and Black in an era where Blackness and Africanness seemed affronted. The issue of African identity came to the fore in a more compelling manner: Is it possible to be an African and yet ascribe to Western Christianity? Is my African culture a hindrance to practicing Western Christianity? John Gatu viewed the incongruity between missionary Christianity and an emerging African Christianity to be of such magnitude that he in 1972 stated,

... the time has come for the withdrawal of foreign missionaries from many parts of the Third World, that the Churches of the Third World must be allowed to find their own identity, and that the continuation of the present missionary movement is a hindrance to the selfhood of the church.³

The context of this is the socio-economic and political upheavals in Africa. In the 1970s, East Africa, like other regions on the continent, were going through a socio-economic and political upheaval. Kenya, Mbiti's country of birth, in East Africa, was caught up in the euphoria of *uhuru* and *harambee*, so was Tanzania, with *ujamaa*, a socio-economic and political ideology of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere.

3. The question with regard to African traditional religions

It was from this context that Mbiti took the lead with his monograph, *An Introduction to African Religion*. *The Church Times* hailed it as “ground-breaking ... a work of scholarship which breaks new and intriguing ground.”⁴ *The Church Times* went on to assert that “... in this work [Mbiti] shows how, behind many simple expression of belief, there often lies a profound faith in God as Father and Creator ...”⁵ On the whole, Mbiti demonstrated that indeed Africans had not only possessed an organised religion but also had a notion of the Supreme Being.

3 See *The_Continued_Importance_of_a_Mission_Mo.pdf*. [Online]. [Accessed: 6 May 2019].

4 Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (back cover).

5 Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (back cover).

Jan Nieder-Heitmann noted that Mbiti made that assertion against the background of some European anthropologists, sociologist and even missionaries that Africans possessed no religion. Among these categories of professionals there were those who discounted African Traditional Religions as animism, fetishism, magic, polytheism, idolatry, superstition.⁶

According to Nieder-Heitmann, not only did Mbiti argue for the notion of the Supreme Being in ATR, but he went a step further, that Africans have the notion of a Personal God, who is known and worshipped under various names, which indicate his attributes⁷. This God is approached through not only ancestral mediations but also directly through prayers.⁸ More critical, however, Nieder-Heitmann noted that, in response to the argument by some Western scholars that God in Africa is viewed or experienced as remote, Mbiti, and the Yoruba scholar, Bolaji Idowu, stressed “His importance in African cosmology, ritual and ethics.”⁹

Thus Nieder-Heitmann argued that Mbiti “not only oppose[d] the view of Western scholars, but he mastery succeed[ed] in resolving the paradoxical conceptualisation of a God at once distant (transcendent) and intervening and involved in the affairs of men (immanent). God is thus both far and near for many Africans.”¹⁰

For Mbiti, according to Nieder-Heitmann, “Religion is to the Africans an ontological phenomenon which pertains to the question of existence or being.” “For him, therefore, and for the larger community of which he is part, to live is to be caught up in a religious drama. This is fundamental, for it means that man lives in a religious universe.”¹¹ “Africans have their own ontology, but it is a religious ontology, and to understand their religions we must penetrate it.”¹²

6 J. H. Nieder-Heitmann, *An Analysis and Evaluation of John S. Mbiti’s Theological Evaluation of African Traditional Religion*, M.Th. (Missiology), University of Stellenbosch, 1981, 68.

7 *Ibid.*, 68–72.

8 *Ibid.*, 69.

9 *Ibid.*, 69.

10 *Ibid.*, 70.

11 *Ibid.*, 13.

12 *Ibid.*, 13.

4. An African consciousness in Mbiti

Kwame Bediako asserts that, “in giving an in-depth exposition of the ATR and cultures, Mbiti seeks to show that “historically, Christianity is very much an African religion.”¹³ He asserts that Mbiti stresses the “homeliness” of Christianity in Africa comparing it to Ancient Christianity in Africa. He urges that Christianity is not foreign to the African soil. Then he substantiates this argument by citing many martyrs on the continent who voluntarily sacrificed for their faith.¹⁴ Hence, Bediako conclude “Mbiti’s case for an African theology, therefore, came to rest not on negative, polemical grounds, but on a positive view of the Gospel as being genuinely at home in Africa.”¹⁵

Then the big question arises: *Is African traditional religion praeparatio evangelica? To what extent does ATR contain elements that can be affirmed as Christian – or be considered as a bridge with Christianity?* This raises the question of the theology of religions, namely how to define the relationship between ATR and the Christian religion. Mbiti choice for the *praeparatio evangelica* model in a selective manner by discriminating between elements in ATR that are affirmed in the Christian religion and others that are not.

In his *An introduction to African religion*, Mbiti outlines African beliefs, traditions and cultures. According to Mbiti, the ontology of an African is embodied in the saying “Africans are notoriously religious.”¹⁶ African life, cultures and beliefs exist as an integrated system. In contrast to the Western worldview, where life is dissected and compartmentalised, Mbiti shows the holistic character of African cultures: the unity between religion and life rather than partitioning of the two. He goes right into the deep ‘bone-marrow’ of African life, and spirituality, the pulse and rhythm of African life. Bediako asserts that, Mbiti’s own Christian commitment and consciousness is a fundamental hermeneutical key by which he argues that

13 Kwame Bediako, “John Mbiti’s Contribution to African Theology,” in Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (eds.), *Religious Plurality in Africa, Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti* (Berlin and New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 199), 368.

14 Bediako, “John Mbiti’s Contribution to African Theology,” 368.

15 Bediako, “John Mbiti’s Contribution to African Theology,” 369.

16 Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*, 27.

“all the religious traditions of Africa other than the Christian constitute in their highest ideals a *praeparatio evangelica*.”¹⁷

Engagement with the African context

John Pobee asserts that theology seeks to address itself to three domains: “academia, the community of faith, and the world.”¹⁸ While academia has generally dealt theology with logical propositions, this way, too, is contextual. In his view, Mbiti pointed out that an oral, non-written, non-propositional style is therefore just as valid.¹⁹ Pobee further asserted that, in communities where theology is within unwritten modes of expression, as in the case of Africa, the collection and analysis of these articulations should be a priority.²⁰ To pay attention to this task is also to pay attention to the people who are producing them. Therefore, “people are subjects of the theological enterprise” and their culture constitute a critical dimension in the study of theology.²¹

Mbiti seemed to have seen the rise of the African Independent Churches as an attempt for Africans to engage with African issues and context more seriously. In this respect, though not uncritical of the African Independent Churches nevertheless Mbiti sees in these churches an attempt to engage with African religious and cultural issues more meaningfully.²² In this regard, for Mbiti, the rise of the African Indigenous Churches seemed to hold promise for the missionary churches in African which would engage with African cultures much the same way as these churches. For Mbiti, the African context must be taken very seriously in doing theology.²³ Thus Bediako asserts that, it is in this regard that Mbiti expected that the AIC’s had pointed a way that would also lead historic Churches in Africa over time to be transformed by the African contextual issues. Mbiti expected

17 Bediako, “John Mbiti’s Contribution to African Theology,” p. 376.

18 John S. Pobee, “African Theology Revisited,” in Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (eds.), *Religious Plurality in Africa, Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti* (Berlin and New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 1993), 138.

19 Pobee, “African Theology Revisited,” 138.

20 Ibid., 138.

21 Ibid., 138.

22 Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*, 191.

23 Bediako, “Mbiti’s Contribution to African Theology,” 368.

that over time African context and issues would influence models of historic Churches.²⁴

However, Mbiti is not an advocate of indigenisation or inculturation. In his view, “To speak of indigenisation of Christianity is to give the impression that Christianity is already made commodity which has to be planted to a local area. Of course, this has been the assumption by many missionaries and local theologians. I do not accept any more.”²⁵

Stimulation of academic debate in the study of ATR

Nieder-Heitmann had noted that Mbiti’s theological scholarship in ATR had exposed this area of study to intensive academic engagement. Nieder-Heitmann cites Mbiti who himself had observed in the aftermath of his great works that:

A great deal of African literature is mushrooming on the relationship between the Christian Faith and African religious heritage. Both theologians, pastors and ordinary Christians are showing great interest in this topic. A wide range of views are expressed ... Some regard African Religion as demonic and try to keep it out of the church and Christian life. Some wish to revive and retain African Religion as the only authentic religion for Africans. For most people it is a practical matter which has to be dealt with daily, because they have to live with realities of both religions.²⁶

It is obvious that Mbiti’s work had made considerable impact. It made some people raise issues or questions regarding the relationship between Christianity and African culture and religions, which hitherto had either been taken for granted, or had never seriously been thought through. More importantly, it made people think what it meant to be a Black African and at the same time be a Christian. However, perhaps one of his lasting contributions has been his methodological approach to the study. Among

24 *Ibid.*, 369.

25 *Ibid.*, 369.

26 Nieder-Heitmann, *An Analysis and Evaluation of John S. Mbiti’s Theological Evaluation of African Traditional Religion*, 6.

other issues, the uniqueness of Mbiti's work lay in his methodological approach.

A methodological approach in ATR

Through Mbiti's intensive academic study, ATR became an area where people sought to enquire more, to engage more seriously and authentically with the issues ATR raised. Others tried to study it out of nostalgia, yearning to return into African past, others seeing it as a threat to Christianity and therefore condemning it. Bediako and others have hailed Mbiti for his contribution in breaking ground for his methodological approach to the study of AR. In his *African religions and philosophy*, with regard to methodology, Mbiti states that, "In this study I have emphasised the unity of African religions and philosophy in order to give an overall picture of their situation ..."²⁷ According to Bediako, Mbiti pointed a methodological principle that "a study of these religious systems is, therefore, ultimately a study of the peoples themselves in all the complexities of both tradition and modern life."²⁸ Bediako further asserts that, Mbiti considered that the study of these systems cannot be separated from the life experiences of the people. "*African religions and philosophy*" so Bediako conclude, "may thus be regarded as a religious history of African societies taken together as a cultural unity within mankind."²⁹

On the other hand, Pobee asserted that, "Mbiti wrote the book to provide a theologian's perspective on the connection between the people and their religious concepts and practices (i.e., an ontological framework). He studied many societies in the continent in order to get a unifying picture of African religiosity, pointing out similarities and differences."³⁰ Pobee further asserted that,

In this study Christianity, Islam and other religions were embraced as African and belonging to the people's historical journey just as

27 Bediako, "Mbiti's Contribution to African Theology," 375.

28 Ibid., 376.

29 Ibid., 376.

30 Bediako, "A Summary of John Mbiti's Contribution to African Theology." See <https://sacadalang.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/on-john-s-mbiti-and-religious-plurality-in-africa.pdf>. Accessed 15/08/16.

much as the traditional religions do. His conclusion was that all of these religions except Christianity prepared the way for Christianity and therefore it is valid for Christianity to be committed in pointing Africa to Jesus Christ.³¹

According to Bediako, later, Mbiti would conclude that Africa's theology is not written but is "in the open, from the pulpit, in the market-place, in the home as people pray, or read and discuss the Scriptures."³² Bediako further asserts that Mbiti pointed out that "Oral theology is a crucial prerequisite to written theology"³³ in that an academic dealing of theology must consist of the looking at these lived-out expressions of the community of faith in the everyday lives of the people.

In light of this Pobee concludes that Mbiti's biggest contribution to African theology is affirming that the African context is a ready receiver and an able interpreter of the gospel. Then Pobee concludes that with Mbiti African theology has gone a long way in showing that African religiosity is not "illiterate."³⁴ In other words, so Pobee asserts, "Motivated to respond to his observation that African had no "theological awareness," Mbiti's writings contributed to "rehabilitating Africa's rich cultural heritage and religious consciousness."³⁵

An African ontology

Mbiti places African ontology at the centre of African Religions and experiences. According to Mbiti, 'power' is the underlying principle towards which African life gravitates, expressed through various social customs, norms and traditions; chief amongst these is integration of life which is expressed through the performance of various rituals with a view to maintaining harmony in the community ...³⁶ This philosophy tries to account for African behaviour, conduct and attitude in circumstances of life, whether good or bad. It is also critically important to note that the

31 Ibid.

32 Bediako, "Mbiti's Contribution to African Theology," p. 387.

33 Ibid., 388.

34 Bediako, "A Summary of John Mbiti's Contribution to African Theology."

35 Ibid.

36 Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*, 37.

holistic dimensions find resonates and is in harmony with communal nature of the society ...³⁷

The concept of African ethics and justice

For Mbiti, the issues of justice and ethics ought to be comprehended within the framework of the African view in which the notion of mystical power plays a vital role.³⁸ It is a key concept in his writings. Not only does it explain how an African views and explains life, but also how an African responds to the issues of good and evil.³⁹

Even more critically “this has implications in the manner in which issues of ethics and justice are understood and dealt with.”⁴⁰ Mbiti argues that it is the sense of African communality, the corporal nature of African communities that has a bearing on the understanding, interpretation and implications of the issues of ethics and justice. In African society, where no word “sin” exists but rather “wrong doing” the act has social implications rather than “individual” repercussions. Wrong doing done by a person affects the whole family and community.

Traditional African spirituality

Mbiti has shown that though Africans never produced Prayer Books, nevertheless they have an authentic spirituality. Mbiti’s *The Prayers of African Religion*, illustrates Africans as an intensely spiritual people. In this work, Mbiti demonstrates “how prayer, of all aspects of religion, contains the most intense expression of African *traditional* spirituality.”⁴¹ Mbiti “contributes to a better understanding of African religion in particular and the religions of [humankind] in general.”⁴² “These prayers contain insights into many aspects into religious and philosophical thought of African

37 Ibid., 38–39.

38 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and African Philosophy*, Chapter 16.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., Chapter 17.

41 John S Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion* (London: SPCK, 1975). Back cover page.

42 Ibid., Introduction.

peoples, such as the concepts of God, man, the world, spirits, God and evil, etc.”⁴³

In Mbiti’s own words, “This collection of 300 African prayers ... is a clear demonstration of Africa’s rich spirituality and adds a valuable dimension to our understanding of African religion.”⁴⁴ Bediako asserts that *The prayers of African religion* (1974), “is a theological interpretation of African pre-Christian prayers. It is a compilation accounting African spirituality manifested “in the yearning for holiness, purity and cleanliness of heart, in the pervasive sense of dependence, faith, trust and confidence in God, and in the immense capacity for joy and thanksgiving”. Mbiti points out that of the three books it is here with the prayers where Africa’s inherent spirituality is most clearly shown.”⁴⁵

The concept of individual immortality

Mbiti’s concept of personal immortality has stimulated another interesting academic debate in some quarters. In his *Love and marriage*, Mbiti enunciated a concept of personal immortality in the African society as tied to the issue of procreation in marriage.⁴⁶ He argues that the survival and memory of the individual in the African community constitutes a critical dimension of the existence of an African within his embeddedness in the African community. Thus, Mbiti argues that in Africa, perpetuation of memory after death depends on bearing children who must continue to carry the name.⁴⁷ Hence childbearing and woman’s fertility are very critical to families in Africa. Underlying this view is the critical importance of communality, solidarity and the role of ancestors. “Mbiti enunciates this concept against the background of the modern challenges that the

43 Ibid.,1.

44 Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion*, Introduction.

45 Bediako, “A Summary of John Mbiti’s Contribution to African Theology.” [Online]. Available: <https://sacadalang.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/on-john-s-mbiti-and-religious-plurality-in-africa.pdf>. [Accessed: 15/08/16].

46 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “A Critique of Mbiti’s View on love and marriage in Africa,” Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (eds.), *Religious Plurality in Africa, Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti* (Berlin and New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 1993), 341-365.

47 Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, London: Heinemann, 1975. p.105.

Churches face regarding marriages and sexual morality. Mbiti has pastoral concerns.”⁴⁸

This aspect of Mbiti’s contribution, however, has provoked a response from some Feminist theologians. One of them is Mercy Amba Oduyoye. In her paper, “A Critique of Mbiti’s view on love and marriage in Africa, Religious Plurality in Africa,” Oduyoye praises Mbiti for his contribution but then she raises academic questions that have practical implications for the pastoral ministry of the Church. Oduyoye questions why should the “value” of women be associated with procreation in marriage? Does this not subject the woman to the whims of men? Does this not undermine even the essence of marriage?⁴⁹

Oduyoye then asserts that, “In contemporary feminism such an immortality, attached, as it seems, to patriarchal concerns for the perpetuation of the name and the passing of property, is seen as oppressive.”⁵⁰ Further, so she comments: “Christian immortality, as identity with and in Christ, and African immortality, as part of the Living-Dead, do not need individual physical reproduction to become a viable concept.”⁵¹ However, Oduyoye concurs with Mbiti, citing him saying, “The concept of personal immortality should help us to understand the religious significance of marriage in African societies.”⁵²

The concept of time and African beliefs

Perhaps more popular but also no less controversial has been Mbiti’s concept of time in Africa. In his *African religions and philosophy* published in 1969, Mbiti illustrated that Africans have notion of time. However, this notion of time is event rather than Mathematical oriented. The significance of the past events marked time. From the “present” Africans looked into monumental events in the past which has shaped the moment. In this respect, for the Africans, the “future” was not into long period in the future. Rather it was short foreseeable, stretching to six months and not

48 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “A Critique of Mbiti’s View on love and marriage in Africa’.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 347.

52 Ibid., 348.

beyond two years.⁵³ It is the significant events of the past that define the present reality and tomorrow.

To denote African concept of time, according to Newell Booth, Mbiti uses the Kikamba “*tene* period” or Kiswahili word, *Zamani* (originally Arabic) “as the centre of gravity in the Akamba conception of history: people’s history and thinking and understanding of the world are oriented toward this finality ...”⁵⁴ Sasa, is roughly understood as the Western “present”, which is embedded in the “past” as *Zamani*. On this concept Mbiti has also had his critics. Newell S. Booth states that Mbiti’s concept might be called “reversed teleology,” time conceived backwards. The critique assumes that “normal” time is linear, past, future and present and therefore refuses to see it otherwise. Booth, citing Benjamin Ray says that the latter seem to understand Mbiti saying that African’s concept of time is the “mirror opposite” of the West.⁵⁵

It would seem to me that Ray operates from a similar assumption as Booth that view African concept of time is the “Other.” Mbiti asserts that “Time as separate does not ‘move’; only events come and go ...”⁵⁶ Yet Booth correctly asserts that Mbiti is not concerned with “Western notion of abstract time which can be measured apart from events.”⁵⁷ Comparing this concept of time with the linear Biblical concept of time Mbiti concluded that “though widely accepted as the only scriptural one, is not the only valid one, but that the two-dimensional concept of time is equally valid.”⁵⁸

53 Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 24.

54 Newell S Booth, Jr. quoting Mbiti, “Time and African beliefs revisited”, in Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (eds.), *Religious Plurality in Africa, Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, Berlin and New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 1993), 83.

55 *Ibid.*, 84.

56 *Ibid.*, 84.

57 *Ibid.*, 84.

58 Nieder-Heitmann, *An Analysis and Evaluation of John S. Mbiti’s Theological Evaluation of African Traditional Religions*, MTh, Stellenbosch, 1981. 82.

5. John Mbiti's translation of the New Testament into Kiikamba

In addition to his prolific writings relating to traditional African religions and the development of Christian theology in Africa⁵⁹ and other engagements, Professor John Samuel Mbiti undertook to translate the New Testament from Greek into his mother tongue, Kiikamba. In fact, he was forced to do it, as he puts it.⁶⁰ However, before I probe this highly praiseworthy work of Professor Mbiti, let me make three remarks about Bible translation: firstly, in Africa, secondly in Kenya and lastly in Kiikamba.

According to Aloo O. Mojola, with the advent of Bible translation, the church grew tremendously in Africa. The spread of the church in Africa is inextricably connected to the translation of the Bible into the local tongues.⁶¹ Mojola describes the process in the following words: “The new readers empowered to read the Bible for themselves in their own languages felt equipped to challenge and question missionary readings and interpretations of the sacred text in their own languages. They too could hear God speaking in their own languages.”⁶² Citing Phillip Jenkins, Hendrik Bosman portrays this state of affairs saying, “Once the Bible is in a vernacular, it becomes the property of that people. It becomes a Yoruba Bible ... a Zulu Bible ...”⁶³ Professor Mbiti himself expressed this sentiment when he said, “The translated Bible is not and cannot remain a foreign book with a foreign Message – it is translated into ‘our’ languages, we embrace it as ‘our book’, with the Message of ‘our God’. The Bible becomes not only a universal book, but also an African book, and additionally it becomes

59 John W Kinney, “The Theology of John Mbiti: His Sources, Norms and Method” in *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 3 no 2, (1979), 65–68.

60 John S Mbiti, “Challenges of Language, Culture, and Interpretation in Translating the Greek New Testament” in *Swedish Missiological Themes*, 97, no. 2 (2009): 141–164.

61 Aloo O. Mojola, “The Old Testament or Hebrew Bible in Africa: Challenges and Prospects for Interpretation and Translation” in *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35, 3 (2014), Art. #1307, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i3.13072014>.

62 Ibid.

63 Hendrik Bosman, *The Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies in Africa in Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. Volume III: From Modernism to Post-Modernism. Part II: The Twentieth Century – From Modernism to Post-Modernism*, ed. Magne Sæbo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co. KG, 2015), 256.

an Akamba book.”⁶⁴ These remarks demonstrate the significance of Bible translation in Africa.

In a dissertation titled *Scripture translations in Kenya*, Douglas Wanjohi Waruta describes the initial stages of Bible translation in Kenya as follows:

There were many problems during the pioneer days. Translators did not know well enough the language into which they were to translate, nor could they get dependable help from their illiterate and semiliterate converts ... However, these early translators were determined to conquer every obstacle, and translated Scriptures started to become available into various languages.⁶⁵

In appreciation of an Akamba Bible translation, Jones Kaleli made a challenging statement to the Akamba sons of the soil in 1985 saying:

... we of the Akamba Church affirm with our fellow African brothers and sisters that in the Bible we have our basic source (tool) for proper Christian theological reflection. We praise God for the faithfulness of those who translated God’s precious Holy Word into our mother tongue. While in the future the need may arise for a revised edition of the Kiikamba Bible, yet at the moment the present translation is adequate for our theological reflection needs.⁶⁶

Eighteen years later, Professor Mbiti was ‘forced’ to spontaneously start translating the Greek New Testament into Kiikamba, his mother tongue in Kenya, spoken by about five million persons.⁶⁷

A 2003 Bible Society of Kenya translation of the New Testament forced him to make a go at translating. When he compared the existing Kamba Bible version of the New Testament with the Greek text, he noted more

64 Mbiti, “Challenges of Language, Culture, and Interpretation”, 151.

65 Douglas Wanjohi Waruta, *Scripture Translations in Kenya*, (PhD diss., University of Nairobi, 1975), 4.

66 Jones Kaleli, *Theoretical Foundations of African and Western Worldviews and Their Relationship to Christian Theologizing: An Akamba Case Study*, (PhD diss., University of Nairobi, 1985), 450.

67 John Samuel Mbiti, “Challenges of Language, Culture, and Interpretation in Translating the Greek New Testament,” 141.

than 1,000 mistakes.⁶⁸ Without the principles of Biblical translation, and without being neither commissioned nor sponsored by any Church or other organisation, he undertook the translation.⁶⁹ By 2007 the Manuscript was ready for publication and he thus earned himself the honour of becoming “the first African scholar to translate the entire Christian New Testament from Greek to Kiikamba.” His translation makes one of the rare translations sourced from Greek, the original language of the New Testament.

To accomplish this mission, he tapped his academic experience and his knowledge of the Kamba language.⁷⁰ He aimed to reflect “the deep context of the Kamba worldview, culture, life as a whole with its history, its contemporary realities and future directions.”⁷¹ I would like to demonstrate the effects of his reflection on “the deep context of the Kamba worldview” beyond New Testament. Although he expressed no intention of translating the Old Testament, he has had a profound influence on Old Testament scholarship. Mojola, an OT scholar writes as follows about Mbiti: “Even though John Mbiti was a NT scholar, his writings have done much to open our eyes to the traditional African world.”⁷² A case in point is an Old Testament study on the translation of the word ‘covenant’ in Kiikamba by Dr. Joseph Muutuki.⁷³

Muutuki disputes the translation of the biblical word covenant into Kiikamba as *utianio* instead of *muma*.⁷⁴ *Utianio* means promising one another or agreement and *muma* deals with relations involving oaths⁷⁵. All the successive translations, in their reviewing of the previous translations, have retained *utianio* as a translation for covenant. According to Muutuki,

68 Kitavi Mutua, “Bible Translator who Made History” in *Daily Nation*. [Online]. Monday May 11, 2015.

69 Ibid.

70 Kitavi Mutua, “Bible Translator who Made History”, online. By academic experience I include academic know-how, skills, experiences of teaching, writing and research., p.142.

71 Ibid. p. 142.

72 Mojola, “The Old Testament or Hebrew Bible in Africa,” 5.

73 Joseph Mwasi Muutuki, *Covenant in Relation to Justice and Righteousness in Isaiah 42:1–9*, (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2013).

74 Ibid., 24.

75 Ibid., 24.

“Mbiti is the one who equates the oaths taken by Africans as covenants ... The fact that the author [Mbiti] calls these oaths covenants underscores the reality of the thesis of this study.”⁷⁶ This is a manifestation of Mojola’s assertion. This background should suffice to contextualise Professor Mbiti’s contribution to bible translation. Let us now consider his own translation of the New Testament into Kiikamba.

The Ecumenical News; a comprehensive online news resource reporting on global ecumenical developments and events from a Christian perspective, made this comment about his translation: “The New Testament as translated by Mbiti will be used in primary schools of Kitui, Machakos and Makeni, and will enable many in the Kamba community to read and understand the gospel.”⁷⁷ Much fascinating for me about this translation is how he fuses the context of the intended readership into his translation. In an article titled ‘*Challenges of language, culture, and interpretation in translating the Greek New Testament*’, he explains two verses he translated in the fore-mentioned fashion. The verses are Revelation 2:27 and Romans 11:28. Let us start by looking at Revelation 2:27 and end with Romans 11:28.

Revelation 2:27 says: “καὶ ποιμανεῖ αὐτοὺς ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ ὡς τὰ σκευῆ τὰ κεραμικὰ συντρίβεται ...” He describes this verse as “a good example of the (sometimes complicated) interplay between language, translation, and interpretation.”⁷⁸ Some translations translate this verse like this: “and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces”. He identifies nine translations in this category including the Kiikamba ones. Other translations say: “and he will shepherd them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces”. In this category he identifies six including his translation. The word in contention here is ποιμανεῖ linked with ῥάβδος, which means stick, staff, rod, and sceptre. Some translate ποιμανεῖ as “rule” and others as “shepherd”.

76 Ibid., 30.

77 Ecumenical News, “Kenyan professor John Mbiti has recently become the first African scholar to translate the entire Christian New Testament from Greek to Kikamba, a language, spoken by a minority of Kenyans”. [Online]. Available: <http://www.ecumenicalnews.com/article/kenya-theologian-mbiti-is-first-african-to-translate-bible-in-kikamba-language-27964>

78 John S Mbiti, “Challenges of Language, Culture, and Interpretation in Translating the Greek New Testament,” 154.

Professor Mbiti chooses shepherd instead of rule. He explains his choice by comparing the British colonial era and the pre-colonial Akamba life. He argues that the people who translate as rule do it because they are influenced by their background. Their background is a background of kings, queens, nobility, military figures, dictators, and foreign invaders. “The rod (or sceptre) in the hands of such rulers has not always been for the welfare of the subjects (ruled)”, he argues. On the other hand, the pre-colonial Akamba society had “no individual rulers. They had a system in which by virtue of age everyone participated in running the political affairs of the community”. Colonial rulers literally used iron rods to rule and thus life under colonial rule was not altogether satisfactory. Shepherding brings a sphere of relations that is quite different from that of “ruling”. At this juncture I would like to quote him extensively. He says:

The term [shepherd] speaks of caring, feeding, nourishing, protecting, guiding, and looking after the welfare of the flocks and individual sheep, goats and cattle. In Akamba culture, this is a very meaningful word and occupation. The people are keepers of cattle, sheep and goats. In traditional life, everyone takes part in caring (shepherding) for the animals. That is a pleasant, honourable and rewarding occupation. It supports life and serves as a source of livelihood for the families. Biblical texts like Psalm 23 (The Lord is my Shepherd) or Jesus being the Good Shepherd have a deep resonance among the Akamba. The shepherd (and cattle keeper) carries a wooden staff (rod or stick) which he or she uses to lead the sheep, goats, and cattle to guide them, and separate them if need be (where a flock is made up of animals from different families), and to defend the animals against enemy attack (jackals, hyenas, leopards, etc.).⁷⁹

He then explains that he “opted for ‘shepherd’ because of its relevance and nearness to Akamba cultural-social life and the positive usage of the word in the Bible. Similarly, rod, staff and stick have positive usages among the people. They use it in bringing up the children, old people support themselves when walking, people use it in herding their animals, they use

79 Ibid., 156.

it as a weapon of protection (and defence), they kill snakes with it when these come close to them, or with it they chase away a threatening dog.”⁸⁰ That is how he fuses the Akamba context into his translation.

Due to time and space constraints, I will not dwell much on the Romans 28:11 translation. I will just present the essence of the translation. Romans 11: 28 says: “κατά μὲν το εὐαγγέλιον εχθροί δι’ ὑμας, κατά δε την ἐκλογήν αγαπητοί δια τους πατέρας”. He categorises translations on this verse into those with anti-Semitism and those without anti-Semitism. He identifies ten with anti-Semitism and they translate the verse as depicting the Jews as enemies of God for the sake of the Gentiles, but based on election they are the beloved for the sake of their fathers. All the Kiikamba translations prior to his translation fall into this category. On the other hand, he translates the verse as follows: “When we consider the Gospel, they have rejected it. That is for your sake, so that you may benefit. But looking at the election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers / fore parents / ancestors.”⁸¹ Only one translation he identifies in this category, making two with his. He then decries the anti-Semitism that the depiction of Jews as enemies of God purports. He pleads for sensitivity in translation and avoid sentiments that can lead to injury and suffering to other people as it happened with the Jews. The holocaust is an example of this suffering.

These two verses demonstrate how Professor Mbiti takes the context of present readers into consideration. Interestingly, he even considers future directions of the readership as his translation of Romans 11:28 and the motivation thereof reveals. However, his style of translation does not go unchallenged. In an article titled ‘*To which context is a translator responsible? A response to John S. Mbiti*’, Anne Lise Matre raises a question of the responsibility of a translator.⁸² Her concern is a situation where the message of the text to be translated seems not to be in line with the interests of the intended readership. She asks whether in such a situation a translator is responsible to the original text or to the intended readership. Her exegesis of the two verses informs her that the original text is more

80 Ibid., 156–157.

81 Ibid., 158–160.

82 Anne Lise Matre, *To Which Context is a Translator Responsible? A Response to John S. Mbiti*. *The Bible Translator* 63, no. 4 (2012):197–206.

aligned to the translations Professor Mbiti opposes. She acknowledges his motivations, but the question of responsibility remains. She reasons that Professor Mbiti's translations divert the intention of the author. She argues that, in fact, even the readers of the Mbiti translation will not understand the 'shepherd' in the sense Mbiti intended. Because of other words surrounding ποιμανεῖ which are warlike in nature, they will understand this "shepherd" not "as something similar to the peaceful shepherding in Akamba cultural-social life, instead they might get a vague idea of a different type of shepherding."⁸³ While she disagrees with his translation, she joins Mbiti in his warning against anti-Semitism in Bible translation. These are issues I hope the Professor will address us on. The contribution he has made in Bible translation we very much admire.

6. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the place of Mbiti in the scholarship of African theology and philosophy is distinct. In the Anglican Church, Mbiti is honoured as a Canon (Latin for rule, criteria). For more than four decades Mbiti has established methodological criteria, rule in African theology and philosophy which have enhanced this study, which gives us reason to celebrate his achievements today. In this paper, we also have highlighted his contribution in Bible translations and how some of his concepts in African Religions and Philosophy manifest in his translations. To some extent Mbiti's affirmation of African heritage as resource for doing African theology and philosophy would vindicate also William John Colenso, an Anglican Bishop in Natal who affirmed some aspects of the Zulu culture and traditions a hundred years ago.

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83 Ibid., 201.

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