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Charles Nyamiti: Vibrant Pioneer of Inculturated African Theology

The sequence in this chapter is as follows: the first observation and preliminary reflections will be on a brief biography of Charles Nyamiti. The next step will be on how Nyamiti examines and elaborates the key concepts as employed in his works. Then the scrutiny of this methodological approach will follow. After that, his basic orientation will be tackled. The next step will be deeply concerned with his pedagogy for the realization of African Christian theology. The chapter will be concluded with a brief general appraisal.

I.

A brief Biography

Charles Nyamiti was born in 1931, among three brothers and four sisters, to Mzee (old man) Theophilus Chambi Chambigulu and Mama Helen Nyasolo, belonging to the Wanyamwezi of Tanzania. The two parents are already departed from our terrestrial life into the celestial one thus, hopefully, already incorporated into the realm of the ancestors who Nyamiti, their son accentuates, articulates and propagates with zeal. What may be forgotten about these parents is that it is they who socialized their son in the Wanyamwezi culture and philosophy, impacting on Nyamiti a great interest in and exciting concern with the African culture(s), philosophy, religiosity and, above all, confronting Christianity with the African world-view.

Being in the seventies, this is a vital age in harmonizing, integrating and disseminating a great thinker's cherished views, guiding ideas, fundamental theories and insights via publications before one is confronted with the twilight of one's sanity and the dawn of senility as well as the impending inevitable mortality.

Nyamiti is among the proud founding scholars of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) whence he became full professor of systematic/dogmatic theology and merited the attribute of outstanding resource person in the Anglophone bloc of African thinkers. He remains professor emeritus at CUEA – perhaps later to be CUEA's ancestral professor.

His linguistic giftedness equips him with enviable assets in intellectual and pedagogical matters and, indeed, in enriching himself with the ability to dialogue with scholars and students from the world over. This multilingual scholar reads, writes and speaks – Kinyamwezi, Kiswahili, English, Hebrew and Greek, Latin, French, German and Gikuyu. He holds doctorates in systematic /dogmatic theology, social anthropology and a laureate in Music composition.

His credential notwithstanding, Nyamiti remains a humble yet tough man, sensitive in matters intellectual, and imbued with a remarkable quest for the truth and search for fidelity. He is a terribly studious person, perhaps a book worm in a positive sense.

A most admirable trait in Nyamiti is his choice to spend his career teaching in Africa, resisting the drive to the West that has seen Africa lose so many of its best “brains.” In his love for Africa and African theology, he voluntarily opted to found and settle in an African institution owned by the Association of Member Episcopal Conference of Eastern Africa (AMECEA) called Catholic Higher Institute of Eastern Africa (CHIEA) which has since then grown to become the reputable CUEA, a unique university rightly renowned for African theology.

After the usual primary and high school education, Nyamiti joined Kipalapala Senior Seminary in Tabora, Tanzania where he acquired his philosophical and theological rooting. By then, the emphasis on philosophy was Thomistic Philosophy. This, as his huge published literature manifests, had a great deal of influence on his metaphysical anchor and theological investigations and reflections.

Nyamiti was ordained a Catholic priest in 1962. His vocation to priesthood remains the rationale behind his Catholicism in his writings with bias towards emphasis on magisterial instructions/guidelines, Tradition (at times more highlighted than the Bible), scholasticism/classical elements intertwined with patrology, and appeal to papal authority. Soon after his ordination, Nyamiti was sent, from 1963 to 1969, to Louvain university in Belgium. It was here that he graduated with a PhD in Systematic/dogmatic theology and a certificate in Music Theory and Piano. He was then sent to Vienna where he studied Cultural Anthropology and Music Composition graduating with another PhD and licentiate respectively. From 1976 to 1981, he was professor at Kipalapala Senior Seminary in Tanzania and a co-worker in some neighboring parishes. In 1983, Nyamiti moved to Nairobi to found what is today CUEA where

he remains to date. Owing to the foregoing, Nyamiti is a globally wanted and hunted scholar. Let it suffice to mention just a few consultancy and professional membership in this regard: For over ten years he was a member of consultant for the congregation for non-Christian religions in Vatican Rome; a co-editor of *African Christian Studies*; founder member of the Ecumenical Theological Symposium of Scholars from Eastern Africa; EATWOT founder member. He was also a resource person for the Special Assembly for Africa of the synod of Bishops.

A great scholar is known not only by one's publications but also through the students one has molded and formed. Nyamiti's pedagogy is specifically rooted in African world-view and Christianity as he gradually initiates young minds to theologizing and philosophizing within the African *Sits em Leben* and orientation.

His vision for African theology is the realization of African theology of reconstruction. A kind of African theology which will authentically and scientifically marry the Inculturation approach with the orientation of liberation theology adhering strictly to orthodoxy and relevance to our changing society and new economic, political and cultural realities. He would wish to be remembered most in this realization, through the students who have successfully passed through him and in his published works.

He never can fit in the confines of talk-shop cliques who never make things happen despite their popularity in fancy talking and undermining others without being exemplary themselves. As a focused scholar, Nyamiti opts more for publishing articles than books thus having just about four monographs and numerous published articles- some of which are "books" by themselves – to his credit.

No wonder some internationally renowned scholars like Karl Rahner have the same option. This inclination made Rahner come up with twenty sizeable volumes of combined articles titled *Theological Investigations*. One can only hope that Nyamiti too will collect and publish his numerous scattered articles into volumes of an African theological investigations. He owes that to us before he enters into the realm of the ancestors. Nyamiti is a hardworking bold, extremely studious, deeply Catholic and orthodox scholar. He tolerates no nonsense in searching for knowledge and truth and standing by these. Immune to destructive malicious criticisms, he takes after Rahner who in an interview expressed his fundamental principle, among others, as: If I am

really a believing Christian, then ultimately, I cannot allow my Christian convictions to depend on the approval society and public opinion.” Among the many people who appreciate Nyamiti’s publications is a Finnish scholar, Mika Vahakangas, who wrote his doctoral thesis on Charles Nyamiti’s theological methodology,¹ and a Lutheran called Stephen I. Munga who published a book on Nyamiti as a champion in Inculturation trend and Mana Buthelezi as expert in liberational perspectives.²

II.

Nyamiti’s conception and Articulation of African Theology

Like any reputable scholar, Nyamiti commences his theology notion not only with the explanation of terms or concepts. He also starts with the methodological issue.³ His precise definition of African theology is “the very self-same Catholic doctrine expressed and presented in accordance with African mentality and needs.”⁴ As for Inculturation, “it implies the effort to incarnate the Christian message in African cultures.”⁵ It is his conviction that to qualify as a genuine exponent of African theology and to acquire the title ‘African Theologian,’ there are some indispensable requirements.⁶ According to him, and many concur, the scientific recommendable definition of African Theology is double-pronged; African theology in its etymological sense, and African theology in the technical sense.

In its broad/etymological sense, explains Nyamiti, African theology is discourse on God and what is related to God in accordance with the African needs in the and mentality as such, it comprises African traditional theology, i.e., African non-Christian theology as found particularly in African traditional religions imbued with mythopoeic, oralness, narratives,

¹ Mika Vahakangas, *In Search of a Foundation for African Catholicism; Charles Nyamiti’s Theological Methodology* (Brill; Leiden, 1999)

² Stephen I. Munga, *Beyond the Controversy: A Study of African Theologies of Inculturation and Liberation* (Sweden: Lund University Press, 1988).

³ C. Nyamiti, *African Theology: Its Nature, Problems and Methods*, Spearhead no.19, Kampala: Gaba Publications, 1971.

⁴ C. Nyamiti, *African Theology: Its Nature, Problems and Methods*, Spearhead no.19, Kampala: Gaba Publications, 1971, p.1

⁵ C. Nyamiti, “A Critical Assessment on some Issues on Today’s African Theology” *African Christian Studies* 5, no. 1(1989), p. 10

⁶ See C. Nyamiti, ‘A Critical Assessment...’ p. 5-19; “My Approach to African Theology,” *African Christian Studies* 7 no. 4, (1991) pp.35 – 53; “Some Methodological Considerations...,” *African Christian Studies* 14, no.2, (1998), pp. 30-41.

dramatic intuitiveness and symbolic characteristics. This is owing to general revelation and theocentricity involved.

On the other hand, in its narrow technical sense, African theology is African Christian theology with focus on Christ, Christian tradition and the Bible as the inevitable revelatory agents. This in turn has a twofold conception namely, the broad sense and the narrow perspective. In the broad sense, African Christian theology is the understanding, presentation and concrete interpretation of the Christian faith in accordance with the needs, aspirations, thought-forms and mentality of the people of the black continent. Understood as the such, African Christian theology has been in existence since the era of the early missionary enterprise.

In the narrow/technical sense, African Christian theology is the *systematic* and *scientific* understanding, presentation, and elaboration of the Christian faith according to the needs, aspirations, thought-forms and mentality of the peoples of the black continent – a notion which as Nyamiti explains, corresponds well with the socio-religion-philosophical and anthropological realities in the black continent. It is within this latter understanding that Nyamiti theologizes with other African theologians like Bénézet Bujo, Tshishiku Tshibangu , Allan Boesak, Laurenti Magesa, Amba Oduyoye, John Mary Waliggo and Kwesi A. Dickson.

III.

Nyamiti's Methodological Approach

Nyamiti's works can be said to be metaphysical, speculative, systematic and in some cases, abstract in the deductive sense. A critical perusal of Nyamiti's outstanding works enables an objective reader to appreciate that the option of his methodological mode reveals, among other elements, the basic stages of the evolution of Nyamiti's thought.

Nyamiti's methodological approach inspiring and guiding the evolution and outlook of his thought as a pioneer member in African theology is mainly and clearly influenced and guided not only by African situation. It is also fundamentally guided by the magisterial instructions. Among them, that of Denzinger-Hünemann (n^o3016) and Vatican II's *Optatam totius* are outstanding in

impacting on his theologization within the African context. It is from here that he borrows and profoundly utilizes:

- The use of reason, implying the use of the idea of social anthropology and other useful sciences like philosophy, sociology, linguistics and history.
- The subordination of such anthropological data to Christian faith;
- The use of analogy when ascribing African categories and other cultured elements to Christian mysteries;
- The employment of the principle of interconnection of Christian mysteries (*nexus mysteriorum*); and
- The relevance of the specific theology for human welfare/ultimate end thus implying drawing out the consequential pastoral implications.

True to his honesty and commitment to the emergence, growth and demystification of African theology, Nyamiti has nothing to hide on how he theologizes as an African.

Like any other theologian, I start by choosing the Christian mystery or topic as subject of my study. After having chosen such topic, I try to find out the appropriate African cultural item or theme which can be employed for theological elaboration of the Christian mystery. In principle, any African theme or category can – according to me – be employed for such purpose. Nevertheless, I usually limit myself to one or several African themes which appear to me as more relevant for theological or pastoral purposes.⁷

He further discloses:

The next step I undertake is theological reflection on the meaning of the Christian mystery – first in itself, and afterwards, in its relevance for our spiritual and material welfare – in the light of the African theme(s). In order to achieve this goal as best as possible, I try to bring about what I have called the intrinsic employment of cultural themes in theology, i.e. the identification of the African categories or themes with the Christian elements (mysteries) in order to allow the African themes to

⁷ C. Nyamiti, "My Approach...", p. 45

enter internally into the theological elaboration of revealed truth so as to form an organic part of it and thus influence its constitution, presentation, orientation and progress.⁸

Moreover, he indicates that the above employment involves two processes: that of identification of such cultural themes with Christian mysteries; and the one of explication of such identification. Within the context of the principle of interconnection of the Christian mysteries and the magisterial pedagogy indicated earlier, Nyamiti tackles almost the entire realm of Christian mysteries. His serious investigation ranges, for instance, from Christology to the Trinity to ecclesiology to theodicy to martyrology to social ethics to creation⁹ mainly through the lenses of ancestorship outlook as understood by Africans. What is conspicuously missing, however, is the theme of canon law. Despite this vivid lacuna, as one reads on and peruses such huge literature, one is confronted with a striking insight: an inevitable appreciation that this is where Nyamiti's originality and creativity in theologizing particularly on the basis of ancestral category of thought within the ambit of the African world-view as analogically and somehow dialectically elevated, purified and accomplished by Christianity is most explicit and is extremely informed about the sources and resources of African theology.

Nyamiti is elaborate and decisive: there are two vital sources highly intertwined, if not equated, with African theology itself. One such primary source, according to him is the Christian sources i.e. the Bible which is the soul of all theology, and authentic tradition of the entire Church – with particular stress on the official teaching of the Church (Magisterium).¹⁰ The other indispensable source is the African one i.e. “the African situation - seen in its relation to its past, present and future... the totality of the African situation as it is found in today's world.”¹¹ It is to be reiterated that it is in strict adherence to these fundamental sources that Nyamiti theologizes.

Nyamiti is so convinced and satisfied with this methodology “with regard to the methodological principles I have been employing so far, I must admit that I have not yet come across an African

⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

⁹ See Nyamiti's select bibliography.

¹⁰ C. Nyamiti, “My Approach...,” p. 39

¹¹ C. Nyamiti, “My Approach...,” p. 39

theological approach which corresponds better than mine to the magisterial directives on theological Inculturation.”¹²

IV.

His Basic Orientation

While acknowledging the two basic orientations in African theology namely the Inculturation and the liberation, Nyamiti is inclined more to the former perspective. Nevertheless, he makes a fruitful effort in integrating the two. As such, Nyamiti may be credited with a third fundamental orientation to African theology, which interrelates the above two to come up with “African Inculturation Liberation Theology.”¹³

Nyamiti ops mainly for the Inculturation orientation, and offers several points to explain this: “African theology of Inculturation fits better with my academic formation in theology and cultural anthropology; this approach corresponds better and more adequately to the prescriptions of Vatican II and other official Church documents on theological insertion of the Christian message into various contexts; the Inculturation trend seems to me more apt - than the one of liberation- to achieve some kind of continuity between the Catholic way of doing theology as has been done throughout history both in the Western and Eastern Churches; on account of its inherent capacity to employ an almost indefinite number of cultural themes as theological points of departure, the Inculturation approach appears to me to be in a better position to avoid the danger of approaching it from the perspective of only one particular reductionism, and impoverishing the Gospel message by as is the case with the liberation trend.”¹⁴

Although, Nyamiti’s readers may refute the above foundation(s) of his theologizing, it is worthless futile and inconsequential. As one reads on through his African theological investigations, one is gradually confronted with the painstaking authenticity with which Nyamiti employs and scrupulously highlights this conviction as his fundamental mediation.

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¹² C. Nyamiti, “My Approach...,” p. 39

¹³ P. N. Wachege, “African Inculturation Liberation Theology,” *African Christian Studies*, no. 1, (1992), pp. 43 – 56.

¹⁴ C. Nyamiti, “My Approach...,” p. 35.

Nyamiti's Pedagogy in Actualizing African Christian Theology

Within the context of the foregoing, Nyamiti comes up with a profound appraisal well backed up with in valuable recapitulations and inspiring recommendations.¹⁵ With a deliberate bias towards Inculturation theology, Nyamiti sees the thematic approach, among other aspects, utilized by a considerable number of proponents and exponents of African theology as essentially comparative. He speaks well of “some particular subject(s), theme(s), or category(ies)” employed by such theologians in the emergence and growth of African theology. Themes like healing, naming ceremony, ancestral veneration, related pluriformity of Christological aspects and so on. Nevertheless, he is quick to point out that many such theologians are devoid of critical intrinsic/extrinsic interpretations, explication and drawing out of the implications.¹⁶

Through his weighty exemplary works, he enthusiastically recommends, not just the identification endeavor of coming up with convergences and divergences between Christianity and African socio-religio-philosophical elements thanks to the theo-philosophical and anthropological sources but also the following creative interpretive vital factors:¹⁷

- Theological interpretation of the parallelisms and differences between the African theme and its Christian counterparts;
- Theological interpretation of the Christian mystery in terms of its African counterpart with which it is analogically identified;
- The use of the principle of interconnection of Christian mysteries. A principle which holds that each of the Christian mysteries is organically linked with all the other s in such a way that it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the particular mystery by examining it in the light of the other mysteries.¹⁸
- Pastoral implications or functional perspective emanating from the above ontological and existential task as reflection.

It is of immense importance to take heed of Nyamiti's counsel and caution on what is involved in the originality of African theology; “it's originality will not consist in the context of faith (this

¹⁵ C. Nyamiti, “A Critical assessment...,” pp.5 – 19.

¹⁶ C. Nyamiti, “A Critical Assessment...,” pp.5 -12

¹⁷ C. Nyamiti, “My Approach...” pp.40ff.

¹⁸ C. Nyamiti, “A Critical Assessment...” p. 13.

must be one and the same everywhere and at all times in the whole Church), but in the same faith. This will lead to new perspectives, accents, ways of approach, categories, etc. and hence to a deeper understanding and new way of living the perennial faith of the Church.”¹⁹

He is also deeply concerned with reiterating that among the major goals of Inculturation theology is “to scrutinize in a scientific way and to probe more deeply – in the light of the African social and cultural contexts – the understanding of the Christian mysteries, in themselves first and, secondly, in their relevance for our life here on earth and in the world to come.”²⁰ These comments point to Nyamiti’s commitment to resolving the problems of African theology. Her pragmatically witnesses to the above prerequisites and principles by utilizing fully these guidelines and critique. Nyamiti’s exemplarity is best reflected in his monumental book *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African perspective*.²¹

In his endeavor to respond to Christ’s perennial question in Mathew 16:13, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Nyamiti explains him as the Ancestor par excellence as he qualifies him as the perfect model, elevation and finality of ancestors.

The book has two main sub-divisions : part One deals with Christ’s Brother-Ancestorship to us through the saints. It commences with the anthropological realm. In this perspective, he expounds on ancestral, philosophy, belief and practices ancestors as understood by Africans. This enables Nyamiti to logically and convincingly draw out four core characteristics, the main elements in the African notion of ancestors. These categories are: natural relationship (consanguineous or non-consanguineous); supernatural status; meditations; and title to regular sacred communication with one’s earthly relatives.

For comparative purposes, and in his tedious theological exercise, he choose Christian issues from the Bible and traditional analogous to ancestral *shauri* utilizing the above four ancestral elements. These are carefully tackled and articulated a s rooted in the aforementioned primary resources of African theology i.e. the Christian sources and the African situation.

¹⁹ C. Nyamiti, “My Approach...” p. 38.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 38

²¹ C. Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*, Gweru, Zimbabwe, Mambo Press, 1984.

Through the selected four ancestral categories, Nyamiti compares and contrasts the African ancestorship and the Christian perspectives. He goes beyond the comparative stage by fully drawing out and identifying “ancestor” as appropriate to Jesus Christ within the African perception as also highlighted and fulfilled in Christianity thereby intrinsically explicating these innovative attributes in African theology. This necessarily, as propagated in his methodology, triggers off the drawing out of the implications of the aforementioned identification and explication in the African interrelationship and conception of the saints and further recommendations in the form of concluding reflections.

Christ as Our ancestor is a pointer to more and deeper contributions by Nyamiti to African theology.²² To give but one example, the scholar eventually developed the ancestral implication on the theological notion of incarnation, published in five refereed journal articles.²³ Where Nyamiti will stop in his ancestorship will be perhaps when he himself will qualify as an ancestor in life after this life.

Some Concluding Remarks

Despite being seen by many as conservative and scholastic, influenced heavily by Thomism, Nyamiti’s contribution to the genesis, realization, growth and future of African theology it is hardly dubitable. It is indeed to his credit that what may be considered conservative in him did not dampen his fervor for an authentic African theology.

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²² See Nyamiti’s select bibliography.

²³ C. Nyamiti, ‘The Incarnation Viewed from the African understanding of Person.’”

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