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Being as Belongingness: Toward an African Trinitarian theology of Inculturation

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Abstract

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the core and early doctrines of Christianity. This doctrine forms the nexus and ensemble of the Christian credo. It is doctrine taught as a mystery of the Godhead. While Christian religion is monotheistic, it nevertheless adheres to this doctrine that there are three persons in God. This doctrine has been taught and passed down to different generation of Christians. Different imageries have been used to espouse and accentuate this mystery of the Trinitarian doctrine. However, these images are presented in western concepts and categories. It is the view of the authors that the presentation of this fundamental doctrine in western concepts and images is responsible for the crisis of identity and shallowness of the Christian faith amongst Africans. The authors argue that using African image to present this important doctrine to Africans will not only deepen the faith but stem the tide of identity crisis among African Christians. Thus, the African ontological concept and image of "Being as belongingness will help Africans to come to a deeper understanding of the fundamental mystery of the Christian faith, stem the crisis of identity that has engulfed many African and deepen the faith Christians.

Keywords: Christianity, Being as belongingness, faith, doctrine, Trinity.

Introduction

Globally, Christianity is witnessing a seismic shift. Europe, which used to host the largest number of Christians, has given way to continents like Africa and South America. Vast numbers of Africans have converted and are converting in droves to Christianity. The era of missionaries from Europe and



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America to Africa is over. Africans are now missionaries unto themselves. There is equally a reverse evangelization. There are many missionaries from Africa ministering and evangelizing Europe and America. In Africa and Nigeria in particular, the number of Christians has grown exponentially. The numbers, however, do not correlate or rather convey the depth of the faith.

The Christian faith at best remains skin deep. Scratch an African person deeply especially in moments of crisis and you will discover that the traditional religion (which they seem to have abandoned) remained ingrained in their sub consciousness. One reason that accounts for this disparity or dissonance of faith is that faith is still presented in western categories and concepts that are not germane to the African ontology and *modus vevendi*. Thus, to avoid what Anthony Chukwudi Njoku called “echo theology,” that is, repeating what theologians in the West gave as interpretation of sacred scriptures, conciliar documents, etc. to non-wester churches, which made African Christians passive apprentices, consumers of ill-informed doctrines,¹ it is expedient that Christian theology be taught and imbibed in African concepts and categories.

Using the theological method of Inculturation, the author examines how African theologians can present and teach the doctrine of the Trinity, a key doctrine in the Christian faith to Africans. Inculturation is not only germane to our inquiry; it brings freshness to the gospel and avoids rehashing worn out concepts.

¹ Njoku, A. P. C. Requiem for Echo Theology: Globalization and the End of the Missionary Era. Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology; no. 16 (2004): 54-55.



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Being and Belongingness

While western philosophy and ontology define and understands “being” in the Aristotelian sense of “that which is” or “the thing in itself,” which places premium on the autonomy of the individual,² Africans define being and existence in terms of relationship and belongingness. In other words, for Africans, “to be” is to belong.³ Existence is in reference to understanding of *being as belongingness*. “To be” is “to belong.” Belongingness gives “existence” and identity to the individual. John Mbiti was more succinct when he avers, “I am because we are.”⁴ Expressed in another way, I exist because I belong to a community of beings (persons). In this community of belongingness, communality and relationality characterize the essence of being. This affirmation accounts for the strong sense of community and relationality.⁵ The notion of communality and belongingness in African ontology correlates to African articulation of God as the ground of all being. It equally makes an important contribution to the theological understanding of Trinity and its implications for inter-human relationship. In light of the aforementioned, this paper seeks to explore the African understanding of *being as belongingness* with emphasis on how this understanding could help in articulating a Trinitarian theology of Inculturation. Stated in another way, the paper examines how the African ontological category of “being as belongingness” could help extrapolate a theology of Trinity as community of three persons, indivisible in their substance and nature.

To achieve the goals of this paper, the following outline will be implemented beginning with a brief overview of the Theology of Inculturation as a point of departure in elucidating an African inculturated theology of the Trinity; an explication of African Cosmology and Ontology as a background to understanding the unity of the Trinity from African perspective; Trinity and

² Chukwu, Donatus O. *The Church as the Extended Family of God: Toward a New Direction for African Ecclesiology*. Xlibris Corporation: Indiana, 2011, 34.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophy* (2nd Ed.). London: Heinemann, 1990, 106.

⁵ Chukwu, Donatus O. 35.



belongingness as communion of three persons, and lastly appraisal. It is my hope that an examination of the Trinity from the point of view of a theology of Inculturation will contribute to and enrich the African understanding of what we mean by unity the three divine persons in the triune God.

Theology of Inculturation

Inculturation is a new method in theology. It gained currency and acceptance in theological circles, especially among theologians from developing countries. It is a term that is used with reference to how to incarnate the gospel in culture. Inculturation theology seeks to deconstruct theology while proffering a different way of articulating the Christian experience of God and creation from a cultural perspective of a particular people.⁶ At the same time, it seeks to remain faithful to the deposit of faith and *sensus fidei*. This is expedient if the cultural concepts and categories are at variance with the concepts and categories that the gospel is presented to a culture.

Pedro Arrupe SJ, who arguably is credited with being the first to use the term, sees Inculturation as: “The incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question...but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a new mission.”⁷ It is my contention that

⁶ Ibid. 97.

⁷ Shorter, Aylward, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, New York: Orbis Books, 1988, 11.



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African theology of Inculturation is not about creating a new gospel or a form of Christianity, but a different way of presenting the one and same reality. It is a deconstruction and re-interpretation of Christianity from the perspective of African ontology and culture. It is if you like, the intermarriage of the gospel with the culture of the people to, which it seeks to incarnate itself. It involves an “on going dialogue between the faith and culture or cultures, the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures.⁸ Pope John Paul II could not have stated it more correctly when he maintains that Inculturation is “the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity into various human cultures.”⁹ From the foregoing, it is obvious that Inculturation is concerned with making the totality of the Christian message incarnate and relevant to a people within the ambiance of their culture.

The task of a theology of Inculturation is to ensure that Christianity is at home with every culture it finds itself. Its primary aim is to present Christianity in such that it becomes a ‘customary’- part of a people’s way of life. Meaning and motivations are transformed from a Christianized culture to a culture in the course of being Christianized and vice versa. Each undergoes a reinterpretation without losing its identity.¹⁰ The Christian while retaining his or her cultural identity embraces the gospel without any inhibitions. Shorter arguing in a similar line insists: “Inculturation means the presentation and re-expression of the Gospel in forms and terms proper to a culture. This process results in the reinterpretation of both, without being unfaithful to either. Anything less is not Inculturation. In other words, it would be a syncretism and not a synthesis- the juxtaposition of non-

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, An Apostolic Exhortation, #52,

¹⁰ Shorter, A. Ibid., 62.



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communicating meanings.”¹¹ Consequently, for the gospel to be relevant and acceptable to a people, it must be inculturated because,

Through Inculturation Jesus Christ adopts new forms and new approaches in carrying out his saving mission to the world, the Gospel acquires a new cultural language and the Church is thereby enriched. Every sector of Christian life is affected. Theology is reformulated. Religious education renders explicit the dialogue between Christ and local culture. The liturgy gives cultural expression to the people’s faith, and local structure community and ministry is created at the secondary or particular level. The universal hierarchical structures of the church are not replaced, but, since they operate in the service of the Christian community, their functions acquire new tasks in the dialogue with culture. These tasks serve to render explicit the presence and the activity of the Holy Spirit into the community, who co-ordinates its creative gifts and guides it in its understanding and its living of the mystery of Christ.¹²

Theology of Inculturation engages every spectrum of theology: Historical, Biblical, Systematic, Fundamental, Moral theology, Liturgical, etc. It is hermeneutical in its approach to the already Systematized Christian theology. Its major goal is the Africanization of Christianity and the Christianization of Africa. Hence, in articulating an African Trinitarian theology of Inculturation, we seek to deconstruct and reinterpret the “already” chastened Trinitarian theology. We seek to explore how the African experience and understanding of “Being as Belongingness” correlates with Trinitarian God. We seek to do this bearing in mind the plurality and ambiguity of interpretations and meanings that has characterized the Trinitarian theology from the early church to the present period.

¹¹ Shorter, A. *Inculturation of African Traditional Religious Values in Christianity-How Far?*
<http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/shorter.html>

¹² Ibid., 62-63



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African cosmology and Ontology as background to understanding the Trinitarian theology of Inculturation

An understanding of African cosmology and ontology is *sine qua* and expedient in our discussion on the Inculturated theology of trinity from African perspective. African cosmology posits the existence of one world divided into two spheres: the visible world we live in (earth) and the invisible world, inhabited by disembodied beings and gods. The line separating the two worlds is infinitesimal because of relationality and interaction of beings, which are inextricably bound together. While the world we live in is transitory, the invisible world is permanent. Relationality and unity characterize and are the mode of being between the visible and invisible beings. The world is hierarchically ordered. At the apex is the Supreme Being the source of all being. Next in the ontological hierarchy of beings are the divinities (pantheons) and ancestors, after they follow human beings, animals, plants, and other creatures. There is no duality in the cosmology. A unified view of the world and beings is maintained. The world is a whole with God.¹³

Central to African cosmology and ontology are the concepts of community, belongingness, and relationality of human beings and the divinity. Community is understood with reference to a group of people bound together not only by consanguinity but also those who share a past and future together in spirit. The community is not just a group of individuals who find themselves bound by geographical and political boundaries. It embraces the living and the “living death” (ancestors, gods) and the Supreme Being. The community is an open-ended reality that embraces people who may live hundreds of miles apart. It gives relevance and existence to individual existence and takes precedence over individuals.

¹³ Kabasele, Lumbala. *Celebrating Jesus in Africa*. MaryKnoll, New York: Orbis books, 1998, 43.



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Nevertheless, it does not obliterate individual identity and freedom. Each person maintains his or her uniqueness. While individuals are essential in and of themselves for the continuity of the community, the community is ontologically superior to individuals. One takes his or her being from the community.

Africa's conceptual understanding of community includes people who share a past, present and future together. This sharing can happen even in the absence of a constant direct face-to-face encounter, or even with people who do not have immediate biological connections. The community extends itself beyond those whom we remember or with whom we are conscious of being connected. "The African conception of communality, particularly as manifested among the Igbo of West Africa, consists of a spiritual unity that binds people together, thus creating a communal bond that is unbreakable by distance or death."¹⁴

This fundamental centrality of community undergirds the uncompromising ontological belief of Africans in the relationality of beings. Everybody is related to everybody in one form or another. Life is lived communally and in solidarity with others. Everybody owes his or her existence to the community. John Mbiti rightly underscores this facticity when he observes:

Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his duties, privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbors and his relatives, when dead or living, when he gets married, he is not alone neither does the wife "belong" to him alone so also the children belong to the corporate body of the

¹⁴ Okechukwu, A. Ogbonnaya. *On Communitarian Divinity*. New York: Paragon House, 1994, 4.



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kinsmen...whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: I am because we are: and since we are therefore I am.¹⁵ A person ceases to be the moment he or she is cut off from the community from where he takes his existence. The cessation is in reference to the loss of identity as a person.

It is pertinent to point out that the strong sense of communality and belongingness, which pervades the entire spectrum of African worldview, when wrongly perceived, has the tendency of being exclusivist. Such being the case, loyalty, and love are restricted to a particular community. The resultant effects would be ethnicism, bigotry, and discrimination. Many conflicts and wars in Africa are attributable to this negative and distorted view of community and relationality. They are exceptions rather than the rule. African communities are welcoming to strangers who are treated equally with other members of the community. It is often the case that brothers and sister do have differences and misunderstandings. Hence, it should not be a surprise when conflicts arise among a people who take their existence from the community.

African worldview maintains a view of divinity that is distinctively different from the Western understanding of monotheism. It speaks of God in terms of community, functionality, and relationality. Though God is the ground of all beings, God does not exist in isolation from the rest of creation. To me, this understanding reflects and correlates to the philosophical debate on the problem of One and Many. In African scholarship, the debate has to do with the nature of the African concept of God and the Trinity. The concern has been whether African traditional religion conceives of the divine as an absolute, singular, personalistic God (monotheism) or conceived in separatistic (polytheistic) terms.¹⁶ I contend

¹⁵ Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophy* (2nd Ed.). London: Heinemann, 1990, 106.

¹⁶ Okechukwu, Ogbonnaya. *Ibid.*, p.13.



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that none of these two options adequately represents Africans' traditional religious views. A concept, which I believe encapsulates Africa's ontotheological understanding of divinity, is *diffused monotheism*. Basically, *diffused monotheism*, postulates the reality of one supreme God or divine principle, presiding over a host of minor deities or gods. The supreme God delegates certain portions of His authority and function to these other divinities.¹⁷

Among the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria and people of Sub-Sahara Africa, the concept of *diffused monotheism* is central to their articulation of the divine. They believe in a supreme God, a high God, who is all good but a transcendent God who has finished all active works of creation and keeps watch over his creatures from a distance.¹⁸ Referring to God as being transcendent from the world does not mean that God is far removed from and unaffected by the affairs of creation. It simply means that God is not easily accessible to human beings. Hence, God is often described as "one who is near and yet cannot be seen or touched." God is an impersonal transcendent Divinity that can only be approached by the mediation of other divinities that are closer to human beings. God is never removed from human affairs.

Trinity and belongingness: Trinity is a community of persons.

The Christian creed professes belief in one God, revealed as a trinity of three persons. The three persons have at the same time one divine nature, essence, and substance and are equal, co-eternal, and omnipotent.¹⁹ Yet they remain distinct from one another. According to this teaching, The Father has no principle of origin, the Son emanates from the substance of the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.²⁰ Commenting on this

¹⁷ Bolayi, Idowu. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. New York: A & B Books Publishers, 1994, p.204.

¹⁸ Uchendu, Victor. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965, p.94.

¹⁹ Rahner, Karl. "Trinity, Divine," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology* (vol.6). Rahner, K. (Ed.). New York: Herder & Herder, 1970, p. 297.

²⁰ Ibid.



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Wolfhart Pannenberg notes: “Tradition has it that the Father alone is without origin (*anarchos*) among the three persons of the Trinity, that he is the origin and fount of deity for the Son and Spirit. In the order of the Trinitarian persons, He thus comes first. He alone, then, is in every respect God of himself.”²¹ This view appears to make the Son and the Holy Spirit subordinate to the Father since they take their being in the Godhead of the Father. It equally seems to rule out mutuality and relationality in the divine persons. Pannenberg comes to aid when he argues that the relativity of fatherhood that finds expression in the designation “Father” might well involve a dependence of the Father on the Son and thus be the basis of true reciprocity in the Trinitarian relations. Consequently, he says “the distinction between the begetting and the sending of the Son, the handing over of rule to the Son and its handing back again to the Father in the eschatological consummation is to be seen as part of the sending and not of the intertrinitarian relation between the Father and the Son.”²²

Trinitarian doctrine equally holds that though the three divine persons are distinct from one another, they are substantially one and indivisible. Their activity is one and the same. Whatever can be said of the one can be ascribed to the other by appropriation. Hence, the resurrection of Jesus may also be seen as an act of the Son of God himself, but again by the power of the Spirit. In the resurrection, all three persons of the Trinity are at work in this event and as such, the relations among the Father, Son, and Spirit have the form of mutual self-distinction.²³

We have in a nutshell outlined the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian theology but, our concern in this project, is how the Africans’ understanding of “Being as Belongingness”

²¹ Wolfhart, Pannenberg. *Systematic Theology* (vol.1). Trans. Bromiley, Geoffrey, W. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1991, 311.

²² *Ibid.*, 312.

²³ *Ibid.*, 319.



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could help Africans in explicating and inculturation this doctrine in their Trinitarian theology of Inculturation. In other words, how does relationality, which is the essence of existence in African ontotheology correlate and advance the understanding of the Trinity as a community of persons? A consideration of the thoughts of the Fathers of the church on this matter would be helpful here.

Some concepts (substance, nature, and person) operative in the definition of the trinity will be helpful in elucidating the relationality of *being as belongingness* to that of the Trinity. Substance as used by the Cappadocian fathers, Athanasius, Tertullian, etc., portrays the three persons of the Trinity as consubstantial with one another-Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Their consubstantiality defines their existence, mode of relationality, and community. The three persons share one substance and nature of the Godhead and none exists without the others. By way of analogy, we could say that each person exists because of its belongingness to others. This no doubt resonates with African conceptualization of *being as belongingness*. I am because I belong to the community. The substance of my being is derived from the community that I belong to. I cannot not be without the community. In the way the Father cannot be without the Son and the Spirit. It equally follows that the Son or the Spirit cannot be without the other persons of the trinity.

Athanasius in his discourse on the mode of being of the trinity made a clear distinction between substance and will. For him, a substance is ultimate and the ground of being of the Trinity. The son shares the nature that he received from the Father. The father cannot be thought of as Father without the Son. The Son cannot equally be thought of without the Father. Athanasius transfers the same argument to the relation between the Father and Spirit. "Only from the fact that the Father is God can it be urged with any cogency that he



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cannot be thought of without the Spirit.”²⁴ Athanasius taught that in the three persons of the Trinity, there is the same identical “substance” or object, without any division, substitution, or differentiation of content, permanently presented in three distinct objective forms.²⁵ This accounts for why some contexts, when speaking of the substance of God, Athanasius uses the term *ousia* in its simplest sense as that which is and subsists by itself, and as more or less equivalent to *hypostasis* in its simplest sense.²⁶ Athanasius’ understanding of substance in relation to the Trinity implies relationality. Consequently, to say that the Son belongs to God’s substance implies that substance possesses almost by definition relational character.

On the other hand, the Cappadocian fathers in an effort to explain the ontological unity and relationality in the three persons of the trinity used the term *ousia* and *hypostasis* to imply that a thing’s concrete individuality (*hypostasis*) means simply that *it is* (that is, its *ousia*). Later they identified the term *hypostasis* with *prosopon* person, a relational term in their explication of the trinity. *To be* and to be in relation became identical. For someone or something to be, two things are simultaneously needed: being itself (*hypostasis*) and being in relation. It is therefore only in the relationship that the identity of each of the three persons appears as having ontological significance.²⁷

Similarly, Gregory Nazianzen sees the trinity in terms of relationality and unity. For him, the One Godhead and Power, found in the three are one and the same.

²⁴ Pannenberg, W. *Ibid.*, 279.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Torrance, F. Thomas. *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994, 15.

²⁷ Zizioulas, John. *Being As Communion*. New York: St. Vladimir’ Seminary Press, 1997, p. 88.



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Though each of the persons is distinct, they are unequal in substance or nature, neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities. In his words:

The Three One God when contemplated together; Each God because Consubstantial; One God because of the Monarchia. No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendor of the Three...when I think of any One of the Three I think of Him as the Whole...I cannot grasp the greatness of That One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the Rest. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the Undivided Light.²⁸

From the above thoughts of the early Fathers on the Trinity one can draw a parallel between their views and that of African understanding of being as belongingness. Their thoughts on substance play a pivotal function in accentuating the relationality in the One God in three persons. Their one Substance is the basis of their equality within the divine community of three persons. It guards against the danger of the Trinity relapsing into ontological subordinationism. One cannot know this substance except as it reveals itself in a particular member of the Trinity. This is very much in congruent with African view that the impersonal pervading force that inhabits and animates the gods and human beings, cannot be known directly except as it is manifested in the interaction of beings and operations of the divinities.²⁹

When Western Christianity says God is *Unum* one and that there are three persons in one God, united and bound together in one substance, Africans understands this only in terms of relationality and communality. Each of the three persons of the trinity is because others are. None exists independent of others or in isolation.

²⁸ Gregory Nazianzen. *Oratio*, 40.41. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310240.htm>

²⁹ Ogbonnaya, Okechukwu, A. *Ibid.*, p. 82.



Conclusion

Community and relationality undergird any meaningful articulation of African Trinitarian theology of Inculturation. Each of the three persons exists because others are. None can exist in isolation from others. Their relationality (substance) is the essence of their being. Not to relate to others is not to exist. At the same time, the relationality of the three persons to one another does not destroy their identity just as the identity of the individuality of each human being is not destroyed in the community. The relationality in the Godhead is a paradigm of relationality not only for Africans but also for the entire humanity. Communitarity is the essence of being and equality, which is based on the fact that all share in one nature.

The relationality of the trinity raises some crucial questions and concerns like; the kind of human patterns of interaction a community and the world at large should envision. It equally challenges to us work toward the attainment of equality of all and to see the totality of creation as one sharing and participating in the one substance of the Trinitarian God. The relationality in the Trinity and the African's *being as belongingness* could serve as a model for unity in a continent ravaged by wars. Each community and nationality would see itself not as existing in isolation from others and of course cannot exist apart from others. We will begin to see ourselves as participating in the life of the community of the three persons in the Trinity. This facticity could not be truer and expedient than in a continent engulfed in senseless fratricidal wars and conflicts. The church in Africa and indeed in the world should present itself as the "family of God," as a people made one with the unity of the Father, the



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Son and the Holy Spirit.³⁰ The waters of baptism should make us transcend our psychological impulse to dominate and destroy.

³⁰ Vatican II Council. *Lumen Gentium* # 4.



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