

# Expressions and Encounters: Experiencing the Histories and Theologies of African Christianity in the Collections of Pitts Theology Library

## A Visiting Scholar's Reflection

by Esther Mombo

*"When an old person dies, we have lost a library."*

Doing research with a colleague a few years ago, I visited several aging people to discuss their encounters with missionaries and the Christian faith. They gave us valuable information; some shared with us letters and pictures they were holding, and they were impressed that we had showed some interest in what they had. They were excited to share, and we were glad to receive. This made us curious about what else was kept in the houses and offices, material that was being eaten away by mold and ants. How would these be recovered and be of use for the young and future generation of researchers of world Christianity and particularly African Christianity? Scholars may not have access to the old people with whom we were privileged to meet with in our field research.

Addressing the group, my colleague reminded them that they were important for the church because they are our living libraries, and meeting with them was such an honour because we got to hear what was not in any of the university libraries we had consulted. He concluded with the remark, "When an old person dies, a whole library is lost." It is with this view that I offer my reflection on the exhibition "Expressions and Encounters: Experiencing the Histories and Theologies of African Christianity in the Collections of Pitts Theology Library." For my experience of the exhibition was nostalgic, a mixture of joy and sadness: joy because I was able to see it myself, sadness because there was much more that could be included but was still rotting away in some homes of early Christian converts, and we have no means to retrieve it for good use. While visiting the exhibition, certain questions came to mind in terms of how many of the students of African Christianity would never have a chance to see and experience such materials. Studying away from home to use the kinds of material that was displayed would be an expensive prospect for them, and they can only get information from secondary data. This raised for me a further fundamental question on the imbalances there are in terms of research and production of knowledge. I am grateful, however, for being there at that time to experience the exhibition. My reflections cover areas that were of interest to me but also are themes that continue to be discussed in the story of the African church. Most significant of these is the role of women in the church.

### **THE STRENGTH OF NUMBERS IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY**

The exhibition served for me to be a confirmation of the documented statistics about African Christianity. The exhibition's geographical sphere is widespread, as it includes materials from different locations in Africa. The exhibition's variety of the church families includes African Instituted Churches, Orthodox, Methodist, and the ones known to be mainline in the language of Christianity in Africa, churches that happen to have relations with the World Council of Churches.

The exhibition uniquely tells the African church story thematically within the social realities of each historical period. By including the oldest Christian tradition in Africa, Ethiopian Christianity and its extant literature, including unique manuscripts in Ge'ez, the most ancient literature in Africa, the exhibition provides testimony of many aspects of African Christianity that remain a field of fertile study. Evidence of the progression of African Christianity is shown by the interaction of Africa and the missionary movement from the West, which introduced to Africa Western forms of education and medical work that the African church has continued to develop and grow.

As Kwame Bediako has noted, though, Christianity has become “African religion.”<sup>1</sup> It is no longer about Western missionary work, but rather a faith maintained and sustained by the Africans themselves. The methodologies of passing on the faith have also been indigenous as different groups seek to serve God the best way they understand God’s mission through Jesus Christ. Western Christianity was denominational, and African Christianity has not only maintained the inherited denominations but also created new ones with different names.

The exhibition takes note of African Instituted Churches and shows the different forms of a movement towards a church that enriches the body of the church in Africa through diverse realities of languages, liturgies, and activities. One of the key features of African Christianity was the creation of the African Instituted Churches (AIC), movements out of Protestant and Roman Catholic mission churches established in different parts of Africa.<sup>2</sup> Known by different names, most of these were founded by men and women who interpreted the Christian faith using African lenses. Some of the reasons for the founding of AICs were the racism in mainline (mission) churches, the negative responses to African culture and worldview, and the missionary paternalism at the time. The characteristics of the African Instituted Churches include a more holistic approach to faith and life, their use and application of the Bible, especially the Old Testament with references to the people of Israel, purity laws, etc., and their identification with the Early Church. Another feature is their positive outlook towards African culture and an African worldview, including the emphasis on community and the acknowledgement of the spiritual world. The exhibition highlights the work of the earliest of the AICs, the Kimbanguist Church. The Kimbanguist Church exhibits the ways of being church in a particular context but also how a church participates in the world church. Students of indigenization of the faith in Africa would always benefit from the ways in which the Kimbanguist Church engaged with the societal issues of its time and how it has developed to be one of the member churches of the World Council of Churches. The Kimbanguist Church is an example of what it meant to be church and what it still means to be church today.

The Kimbanguist Church serves as a representative of the African Instituted Churches across the continent, as they tried to integrate African spirituality and realities of their period with the mission-founded churches of the time. African Instituted Churches responded to the needs and questions of the converts of the time in a creative and imaginative manner. The issues with which the African Instituted Churches dealt were of spirit and matter, and they responded to them in whole without partitioning the body and the spirit, as it appeared to be in the mission-founded churches. As well as responding to the questions of Africans, some of these churches were open to the ecumenical movement both on the continent and in world ecumenical gatherings. The call for ecumenism in Africa was earlier than it was in the world ecumenical movements. In Kenya, for instance, as early as 1905, different mission agencies began questioning the import of European denominationalism for Africa. By 1913, different mission agencies agreed to collaborate, particularly with the training of church leaders. The formation of ecumenical theological institutions was a departure from denominational colleges,

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kwame Bediako, “The Roots of African Theology,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 13 (1989): 58-62, 64-65.

<sup>2</sup> See Afe Adogame and Lizo Jafta, “Zionist, Aladura and Roho: African Instituted Churches,” in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu Kalu, vol. 3, Perspectives of Christianity Series 5 (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005), 310-13.

which were meant to socialize the students in the dogma of the particular denomination.

Different national councils of churches in Africa and the All Africa Conference of Churches were platforms for churches to discuss their role in the society. These institutions were not an end in and of themselves; they developed to enshrine and inculcate a certain vision and perspective of ecumenical imperative. In the African context, the need for ecumenical relations was significant because of ethnic and religious pluralism. Both the mission-founded and the African Instituted Churches, like the Kimbanguist Church, sought platforms outside of their boundaries to be able to attend to wider societal needs. The ecumenical vision was not only an issue related to denominational relations, but a path towards the unity of peoples. At the same time, the ecumenical vision is one in which theology engages with secular issues for renewal and transformation. While this complexity cannot be captured in a single exhibition, this display highlighted nicely the ecumenical vision of different churches in Africa.

### AFRICAN AGENCY IN THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH

The exhibition also focuses on the different roles and personalities in African church leadership. The preparation of African church leadership was significant for the development of the church, and Samuel Ajayi Crowther (c. 1809-1891), the pioneer leader, is prominently featured in the exhibition. In the life and ministry of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, there is an embodiment of what “the self supporting, self governing, and self propagating church” looks like, a theme that was strong in the mission work of Henry Venn.<sup>3</sup>

Like other pioneer African leaders, Crowther, a captured and freed slave and pioneer student of Furah Bay College, stood juxtaposed against the missionary ideals and African expectation. His life and work is the focus of historians of a number of areas of church life: theological education, the translation of language, and leadership in the church. A gifted person, Crowther was western educated and then ordained and consecrated a bishop to serve the church in Africa.

Among his many contributions to the church, perhaps of greatest significance is Crowther’s translation work, which continues to engage theologians of the African church. Lamin Sanneh, among others, has observed that the translation of the scriptures to local languages contributed to the rapid spread of Christianity in Africa.<sup>4</sup> By considering the works and engagement of Crowther, as the exhibition does, one begins to experience as true the observation of Sanneh. Translation of the texts to African languages has continued to be significant in Africa, particularly Bible translations. According to Andrew Walls, “Bible translation as a process is thus both a reflection of the central act on which the Christian faith depends and a concretization of the commission which Christ gave his disciples. Perhaps no other specific activity more clearly represents the mission of the Church.”<sup>5</sup>

Walls summarizes well the importance of translation:

Incarnation is translation . . . The translation of God into humanity, whereby the sense and meaning of God was transferred, was effected under very culture-specific conditions . . . The first divine act of translation into humanity thus gives rise to a constant succession of new translations. Christian diversity is the necessary product of the Incarnation.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Henry Venn, *Retrospect and Prospect of the Operations of the Church Missionary Society* (London: Church Missionary House, 1865).

<sup>4</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989). See also Ype Schaaf, *On their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1952).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 28.

<sup>6</sup> Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 27.

The exhibition highlights the impact of Crowther's work in his use of vernacular for translation, which Bediako argues is at the heart of incarnation:

The ability to hear in one's own language and to express in one's own language one's response to the message which one receives, must lie at the heart of all authentic religious encounters with the divine realm . . . (the) deeper significance is that God speaks to men and women always in the vernacular. Divine communication is never in the sacred, esoteric, hermetic language; rather it is such that all of us hear in our own language the wonders of God.<sup>7</sup>

He continues by arguing for the necessity of work like that accomplished by Crowther: "Taking the vernacular seriously becomes not nearly a cultural but also a theological necessity, for it is only through vernacular that a genuine and lasting theological dialogue with culture can take place."<sup>8</sup>

The legacy of Crowther in the use of vernacular language is a great foundation for other vernacular studies as far as theology is concerned. In more recent times, theologians have deliberated on ways in which the African people can express their faith through projects such as indigenization, inculturation, contextualization, reconstruction, and Savannah Theology.<sup>9</sup> These projects have tried to deal with issues of language, experience, and context of African people. There have also been projects developing an African hermeneutic, principles of interpretation that accord well with the African context and ethos, such as the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

In Crowther's ministry, as highlighted in the exhibition, one sees a leader who endeavours to understand his context and provide ways of responding to the needs of the people by using a language they understand. While the specifics of Crowther's context were different, the questions being raised are not different from those that are raised today with regard to the formation of Christian leaders. Crowther dealt with a colonial context, struggling with race and being forced to justify the indigenization of the church. Even though the context of Crowther was different, the questions the church faces are still the same insofar as theology and leadership are concerned: What is the language of theology? What are the contextual realities in the study of theological education?

One other interesting way African agency was highlighted in the exhibition was the use of photography on display, particularly the display of cartoons. Paul Jenkins highlights the importance of this sort of rediscovery of mission photography:

Individual cataloguing of historical photographs is valuable in itself . . . it creates value . . . and introduces a new quality into discussion of the past and should enable new forms of discourse about the past to develop. Using visual sources correctly and with the necessary rigor and accuracy could have as revolutionary an impact as working with oral sources had in African History a generation ago.<sup>10</sup>

Even if Jenkins is discussing cataloguing and how this can be a basis for discussing the past and a source for history, other aspects come to light in this exhibition. This is understanding the context in which some of the pictures were taken and the themes the pictures bring to light, but also what they do not say. In any presentation, there is a particular narrative being told, and this exhibition certainly had one. Part of this particular exhibition narrative was to trace the humble beginnings of the Christian story in Africa, using the initiatives and imagination of the African people in particular. In this case, the exhibition, for me, served as

<sup>7</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 73.

<sup>8</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> See John S. Pobee, *Skenosis: Christian Faith in an African Context* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Jenkins, "Much More than Illustrations of What we Already Know: Experiences in the Rediscovery of Mission Photography," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26 (2002): 157-158.

a part of a teaching curriculum in world Christianity. The exhibition was unique in the presentation of the African church story, but the materials were well selected in regard to themes that could be developed into specific courses. Apart from the African agency in the works of Simon Kimbangu and the Kimbanguist Church and Samuel Ajayi Crowther, among others, the display of cartoons revealed much about the way Christianity engages with society. Cartoons are a source of varied forms of information. As much as they are humorous, behind the humour there is a story of joy, pain, affirmation, but most importantly a story of protest. Through cartoons, issues of social justice can be brought to light and condemned. In a context of repression, people have to find another language to name evil, and cartoons, such as the ones on display, present an ideal medium. The Bible's use of imagery provides the impetus for such use, especially in the context of political repression. In using cartoons, one invites discussion or dialogue about difficult subjects, be they theological or cultural in any context. The exhibition highlights that cartoons provide another example of African agency in teaching theology or history, since cartoons reflect a particular context, and visitors can learn much about a particular historical context by studying the cartoons that were created in it.

The exhibition brought to the fore the themes of theological education and leadership of the churches in Africa. These issues are critical because theological education has a more direct bearing on Christian leadership than perhaps any other single factor. This is because the primary objective of theological institutions worldwide is seen as the equipping and training of church leaders. Theological education is not only significant in the mission-founded churches, but also in the African Instituted Churches, which the exhibition shows. The nature of theological education varies from denomination to denomination, but the role is the same. It is not just the nature of theological education that goes into the formation of leaders, but also the circumstances in which they work. The choices they make and the positions they hold are influenced by the questions they ask and the answers they offer. The practice of leadership contributes a lot to the ways of leadership.

The exhibition's focus on leaders like Simon Kimbangu, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Abel Muzorewa, and Daniel William Alexander, to name but a few, is confirmation that training occurs not only at the seminary, but also in the practice of ministry. A relevant theological education is one in which the learners are encouraged to ask questions and seek answers, rather than being given answers to questions that no one is asking. In addition, relevant theological education promotes the integration of contemporary issues into the study of theology and history. Contemporary issues are not static, because contexts and historical periods differ from one another. In today's theological education in Africa, issues such as gender, HIV/AIDS, disability, human rights, climate change, and the role of the church in democratization cannot be left out of the curriculum. As noted above, leaders like Samuel Ajayi Crowther were educated in the West and in colonial languages, but they were able to translate and interpret theology into the language of the people. Academic theology in Africa is done in colonial languages in most parts, and in some cases curricula are still colonial where the story of African Christianity is not treated as part of world Christianity. As it is with early leaders of the church in Africa, the language of theology and the mission of the church must carry on an African hermeneutic. The exhibition, therefore, was a reflection of the challenges one faces when one has to teach world Christianity and African Christianities in particular. What sources and lenses does one employ?

### **FAITH SPREAD THROUGH THE HYMNS**

The exhibition is unique in the way hymns from particular traditions are used. The hymns displayed include those that are translated from English into vernacular languages, though the translations may use the same tunes. There are also those that are a creation of Africans themselves, expressing the ways in which the people understand the message of God through the reading and interpretation of the Bible. Even before the missionaries arrived, singing played a large role in the people's religious views. Through song and

dance, Africans passed knowledge about different aspects of their society. The songs aided in learning and entertainment. Through song and dance, community values and ethics were taught and reinforced. There were different types of songs, including praise, scorn, grazing, praying for rain, praying for floods to end, drinking songs, etc. Songs were also composed for practical purposes such as lodging a complaint.

In general, missionaries tended to look down upon African music and instruments in the earlier days of their establishment. In the mission-founded churches, the songs that were sung were those that were translated from English hymnals.<sup>11</sup> Alongside the translated hymns, the instrument to accompany singing was primarily the piano. This was not the case with the African Instituted Churches, who formulated their own music and adapted the African instruments to use in their churches.<sup>12</sup> This was the result of the translation of the Bible and the realization that there are many great hymns in the Bible, particularly in the Psalms. Likewise, there are different instruments used to sing praises to the Almighty God. African Instituted Churches indigenized music in view of relating well to the African worldview. In praising God the African way, African Instituted Churches used instruments such as drums that had a lot of symbolism in the community. The beats of the drum would tell what the context is or what information is being passed around. In church music, the drum became an instrument of expressing praise and adoration to God.

The exhibition did a nice job of showing the diverse ways that music has been used in African Christianity, reflecting different cultural and theological viewpoints.

#### **WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP: FROM MAMA MWILU KIAWANGA NZITANI MARIE TO THE CIRCLE OF CONCERNED WOMEN THEOLOGIANS**

Another important theme that runs throughout the exhibition is African women. Statistics show that the church in Africa is composed of and is sustained by women and their unceasing devotion. Although men dominate the paid and officially recognized leadership positions in African churches, it is women who support the churches in most places. Their work in the churches, although indispensable, remains unpaid and often unacknowledged. In some churches where women's work is acknowledged, the financial component of the recognition still goes to the official male leaders. Even though women make up the majority of membership in these churches, they continue to be subjected to a subordinate role, and their presence in the churches and their needs are yet to be fully recognized.

This neglect is now beginning to be addressed in most fields of writing, but particularly among those who are writing the stories of mission. Take, for instance, Dana Lee Robert's book *American Women in Missions* and the edited volume *Women and Missions Past and Present*, works that present perspectives on missions from all over the world, including one essay actually written from Kenya.<sup>13</sup> There are other texts that are slowly bringing to light women's contributions to the church in Africa. However, most of the information about women remains in archives, a fact that highlights the significance of this exhibition. This exhibition brings to the fore women in their various roles as wives, mothers, leaders, partners, and founders of the Church. Notable among these in the exhibition are Mama Mwilu Kiawanga Nzitani Marie, the wife of Simon Kimbangu, and Susan Thompson, the wife of Samuel Ajayi Crowther. While there is not as much information about these women as there is about their husbands, their being named in the exhibition gives them voice and acknowledges the role they

<sup>11</sup> For example, see the Nyimbo Standard used in the Anglican Church of Kenya, first published in 1897. The hymns are translated from English to Kiswahili, and they come from English hymnals, including Golden Bells and Hymns of Faith collections.

<sup>12</sup> See Ane Marie Bak Rasmussen, *Modern African Spirituality: The Independent Holy Spirit Churches in East Africa, 1902-1976* (London: British Academic Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Dana Lee Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997); Shirley Ardener, Fiona Bowie, and Deborah Kirkwood, eds., *Women and Missions: Past and Present: Anthropological and Historical Perceptions* (Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women) (Herndon, VA: Berg, 1994).

played as wives and leaders. Women like Marie and Susan were significant in the beginnings of their churches as leaders of the women in the churches. While wives of leaders of the church are often invisible or, when they are visible, they are described through the lenses of patriarchy, this exhibition does a wonderful job of highlighting them as representative of women in leadership roles in African churches.

The large women's groups are pillars of the church, but they can also be seen as churches in and of themselves. These women's groups such as The Guild of St. Monica (The African Orthodox Church's women's organization), Mothers' Union (Anglican), the Women's Guild (Presbyterian), and the United Society of Friends Women (Quakers) provide spiritual and moral support for women. In many cases, women in these groups find a way to exercise their freedom to minister to one another, to explore scriptures together, to speak of their family lives and their lives as a whole. Even though these groups may be seen as aiding patriarchy and lacking hermeneutical tools to critique patriarchy, they remain the source of strength for many women in their denominations. These women's groups are also a source of financial support for the churches through fundraising.

Women's work in the church is not limited to the women in uniform alone. In more recent years, women theologians have made significant strides in the church through different forms of leadership and the writing of theology. The ecumenical organisations, for example the All Africa Conference of Churches, became spaces issues like women's ordination and leadership were discussed.<sup>14</sup> There are two ecumenical organizations that became springboards for African women theologians. The first was the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998), set up by the World Council of Churches (WCC), aimed at empowering women to challenge oppressive structures in the global community, their churches, and communities. It was also meant to affirm—through shared leadership, decision making, theology, and spirituality—the decisive contributions of women in churches and communities. It was designed to give visibility to women's perspective and actions in the work and struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, to encourage the churches to take actions in solidarity with women.<sup>15</sup> The second ecumenical organization is The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, which was launched at Trinity College Legon, near Accra, Ghana, in 1989, a year after the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, under the leadership of Prof. Mercy Amba Oduyoye. This is an ecumenical and interfaith body of African women theologians. The Circle aims to empower lay and ordained women to study and write theology that will have an impact on the churches. Since 1989, members have discussed various theological themes and published over a dozen books. The themes addressed include the Bible, an objective critique of African culture, violence against women, and interfaith issues. The exhibition brings women to the center of the African Church by using the literature produced by women and in the way they tell their story.<sup>16</sup> Through theological writing and leadership, women continue to challenge the ideology of patriarchy, which is alive in the African church, theological institutions, and society at large. Women theologians continue to raise issues around theological education curricula, the ordination of women, and role of women after ordination.

### **MORE THAN AN ART EXHIBITION**

As I stated, experiencing the exhibition was both a joyous and painful experience. It was joyful because it was good to experience through art and archival resources the African church story. The exhibition was also painful, however, because it highlighted the imbalance of knowledge production and sharing. Even though it

<sup>14</sup> See Mercy Oduyoye, "Churchwomen and the Church's Mission," pp. 68-80 in J.S. Pobee and Barbel Von Wartenberg-Potter, eds., *New Eyes of Reading: Biblical Reflections from the Third World* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> See Irja Askola, *Living Letters: A Report of Visits to the Churches during the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), 13.

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Nyagondwe Banda-Fiedler, *A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 1989-2007* (Mzuzu, Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2017).

has been observed that the center of Christianity is no longer in Europe, but is now in Africa and Asia, there are few African students of church history who have access to the types of material featured in this exhibition. What the exhibition has brought to light is the reality that Africa may have the numbers, but the information about numbers is stored somewhere else.

The reasons for this imbalance include the structural challenges that make it hard for researchers from the majority world to access basic bibliographical data, such as are included in this exhibition, as well as other research that remains inaccessible altogether. In addition to the structural challenges, there is also the financial inhibitions for students and researchers of the African church story. This can clearly be seen in the curricula of courses on the church story that continue to lay emphasis on the Western church and not the African church, curricula that fail to take note of the African agency in the establishment of the church theologically. Courses teaching history or theology need to be inclusive of all groups that make up the church.

In this essay, I have reflected on my experience with the exhibition “Expressions and Encounters: Experiencing the Histories and Theologies of African Christianity in the Collections of Pitts Theology Library.” In my reflection, I have picked some of the themes that I found enriching to the ways in which the African church story and theology come out from the art and archival materials displayed in the gallery, and I have used the exhibition as a launching point to consider major topics for future study of African Christianities. I have noted the ways in which there is a rich tradition and heritage of using images to present a narrative. The topics that I have discussed, including the AIC, African leadership, unity, women, and democratization are ongoing themes in the story of the church in Africa. There is great interest in the study of theology and its varied subject areas, and the study of history is important. The exhibition confirmed this fact very well, as it was not an end in itself but a foundation and call to action for researchers of African church history. Giving attention to the leadership of women and their theological contribution gives voice to those in the margins. The reality of the exhibition is twofold. First, it reflects the imbalance of producing and sharing of knowledge. Second, it highlights the challenge of working towards ending that imbalance. In this case, the exhibition was much more than an art exhibition.