

The Trinity in Africa

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1. Introduction

This contribution is a literature-based research that involved analysis of primary literature on the Trinity in African theology. Although the beginning of the historical development of the Christian doctrine of God as the Trinity may be rooted in Africa, not least because of the theological contributions of early African theologians such as Tertullian, Origen, Arius, Athanasius and St. Augustine (Bediako 2004:154; Ngong 2017:55; Ogbonnaya 1994:56), this article focuses on Trinitarian hermeneutics in modern African Christian theology (hereafter African theology). It is a narrative analysis of the African discourse on the Trinity with reference to three phases in the history of African theology. These are namely the phase of initial debates on the Christian theological validity of African concepts of God, the phase of literary productivity on African Christologies and, finally, the phase of post-colonial African theology. In the context of this contribution, the phrase ‘African theology’ refers to modern academic ‘theological reflection by African Christians on the interplay between Christian tradition and the African religio-cultural heritage, including contemporary experience’ (Sakupapa 2018:407).

Given debates on the racialisation of the concept of Africa, the terms ‘Africa’ and ‘African’ denote respectively the geographical region known as sub-Saharan Africa and peoples indigenous to this region. Such a deployment of the terms Africa and African is significant not only for analytical purposes but also given contemporary decolonial debates on the ‘geo-politics and body politics of knowledge’ (Mignolo 2007:453).¹ Accordingly, to foreground the locus of my enunciation, the African in this research is the black African. However, given the colonial legacy of the language divide between and among Anglophone, Francophone

1 For philosophical discussion on conceptualisation of Africa and African, see Mudimbe (1988).

and Lusophone Africa, the analysis was limited to data sources in the English language.²

2. The ecumenical significance of the 20th century renaissance of Trinitarian theology

It is necessary to offer brief comments on the 20th century Trinitarian renaissance, not least because of the significance of two issues that have emerged as central concerns in contemporary Trinitarian theology,³ namely the relationship between the economic and the immanent Trinity, and the practicality of the doctrine of the Trinity (Venter 2010:573). Schwöbel (1995:1–30) identifies groups of factors that led to renewed interest in Trinitarian theology in this regard. The first of these is the ‘encounter of Western theology with the traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy in ecumenical conversations’. Karl Rahner’s (1904–1984) diagnosis of marginalisation of the Trinity in western theology constitutes the second group of factors. The other factors identified by Schwöbel (1995) include the relationship between philosophical theism (and philosophical atheism) and a Trinitarian doctrine of God, and the relationships between the Trinitarian understanding of God and the understanding of human persons and human society.

Following the formative contributions of the Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) and the German Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984) to the renaissance of Trinitarian theology, many theologians have articulated various Trinitarian theologies. Amongst other concerns, theologians have engaged with the significance and implications of Rahner’s (1970:21–22) Grundaxiom, namely that ‘the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity’. These include Jurgen Moltmann, Walter Kasper, T.F. Torrance, Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Colin Gunton, among others.⁴ Rahner’s (1970) axiom continues to trigger reflections on the relationship between the economic and the immanent Trinity. Some scholars are wary that Rahner (1970) eclipses the immanent Trinity, or that he identifies the immanent and the economic Trinity too closely. Still others fear that the distinctions between the economic and immanent Trinity should not be drawn too sharply. According to LaCugna (1991:312, 342–347), one of Rahner’s key interpreters, if there is any distinction between the ‘economic

2 For instance, the following have been published in French but not included in the overview: Ukwuije (2018); Bishwende (2008).

3 For an overview, see Chalamet and Vial (2014).

4 Other important figures to broader Trinitarian theology include Wolfhart Pannenberg, Eberhard Jungel, Colin Gunton, Elizabeth Johnson, Robert Jensen, Ted Peters and Leonardo Boff, among others.

trinity' and the 'immanent trinity', is that it is conceptual, rather than ontological. LaCugna thus suggests an alternative paradigm to Rahner, namely that *oikonomia* and *theologia* are inseparable.⁵ In LaCugna's (1991:211, 348–349) view, the 'close relationship between soteriology and doxology confirms the proper connection between *oikonomia* and *theologia*, essence and energies, which are inseparable in theology'. For Zizioulas (1991a:23–24), what is needed is an apophatic theology in order not to draw sharp distinctions between ontology and epistemology. However, in Moltmann's (1981:161) doxological understanding of Rahner's axiom (1970), he argues that the specific starting point for distinguishing between the economic and immanent Trinity is to be found in doxology.⁶

The other issue raised in the recent Trinitarian Renaissance concerns the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. Rahner (1970:10) succinctly placed this issue on the theological agenda by highlighting the isolation of the Trinity from Christian faith and life. Among others, LaCugna (1991:1) attempted to illustrate that the doctrine of the Trinity is 'ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life'. Similarly, Moltmann (1981:165) accentuates the practicality of the doctrine of Trinity with reference to its significance to overcome domination, whether ecclesiological, sexual or political, thus articulating a social doctrine of the Trinity. Others have explored the implications of Trinitarian theology for anthropology, the doctrine of creation, ecclesiology, ecumenism, ecology (David Williams), a critique of sexism (David Cunningham, Elizabeth Johnson), mission, pastoral theology (Paul Fiddes), leadership, personhood (Zizioulas) and political theology (Miroslav Volf). Counterintuitively, these contributions affirm Jenson's (1997:31) observation that the Trinity is not a 'separate puzzle to be solved but the framework within which all theology's puzzles are to be solved'.

3. The Trinity in African Christian theology

Notwithstanding the significance of the 20th century rediscovery of Trinitarian theology as described above, it was and remains a typically western and North American affair. In the growing body of literature on African Trinitarian hermeneutics, African theologians are demonstrating creativity in their various reflections on the Trinity. Given that the African discourse on the Trinity cuts across denominational and theological traditions, it may be described rightly as an ecumenical discourse. In what

5 Some have charged LaCugna (1991) with reducing the Trinity to the economic plane.

6 For a discussion on the various models of understanding this relationship, see Lee (2009).

follows, I offer an overview of contemporary African reflections on the Trinity with specific reference to three phases in the history of modern African Christian theology.⁷

3.1 Phase 1: The quest for the theological validity of African concepts of God

While much of the early 19th century missionary and anthropological discourse denied Africans any concept(s) of God or, for that matter, religion, pioneer African Christian theologians such as John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu located the African belief in a Supreme Being as a point of continuity between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity. The polemic nature of this early phase of African theological discourse on God was prompted by the western missionary denigration of African religion (and culture) and denial of the existence of African concepts of God. They sought to remedy western missionary translations of God which portrayed God as foreign to Africans. I argue that this discourse by pioneer African theologians may well serve as a prolegomenon to any meaningful Christian theology of God in modern African theology (cf. Uzukwu 2009: 32). It must be noted that these theologians, most notably Mbiti and Idowu, engaged with texts by western scholars such as Edwin Smith, Malcolm McVeigh and Geoffrey Parrinder,⁸ which offered sympathetic accounts of concepts of God.⁹ Smith, particularly, intimated on the African belief in the Supreme Being as a point of continuity between ATR and Christianity (hereinafter continuity thesis).

This continuity thesis found expression in many of Mbiti's writings. In his *Concepts of God in Africa*, Mbiti (2013:91) argued that the notion of God as creator was 'the commonest attribute of the works or activities of God' among African peoples whose concepts and names of God were compiled by him. Idowu shared Mbiti's claim for the theological significance of African names for God and of a monotheistic continuity between Christianity and ATR. However, Mbiti's claim of the implausibility of atheism in traditional

7 For an overview of the South African contribution, see Venter (2016).

8 It was Parrinder who first introduced African Traditional Religion as a separate category of study while teaching at the University College Ibadan in Nigeria.

9 See, for instance, the edited volume by Smith, namely *African Ideas of God: A Symposium* (1950) that brings together surveys on beliefs about God amongst particular peoples in sub-Saharan Africa. The authors claim that the 'tribes' they studied had belief in the Supreme Being. Of the 12 contributors, 11 were western missionaries. See also Smith's *The Secret of the African* (1929) and *African Beliefs and the Christian Faith* (1936); McVeigh's *God in Africa: Concepts of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (1974) and Parrinder's *African Traditional Religion* (1954).

Africa, encapsulated in his famous phrase, namely that 'Africans are notoriously religious', has been interrogated. A notable critic in this regard is Eloi Messi-Metogo (1997:33–45) who, contra-Mbiti, documents accounts of African indifference to the Supreme Being.

Although affirmed by several African theologians who nevertheless expressed differing views on the degree of continuity (cf. Dickson 1979; Kibicho 1978; Setiloane 1979),¹⁰ the continuity thesis attracted two related but different critiques. The first came from African evangelicals (for example, Byang Kato) who stressed discontinuity in God's identity on the basis of alleged doctrinal orthodoxy. The second emerged from the ranks of African intellectuals (for example, Okot p'Bitek), who critiqued African Christian theological reinterpretation of African concepts of God for the sake of decolonisation (see Conradie & Sakupapa 2018:43–47).¹¹

Nevertheless, a salient implication of the continuity thesis was that Africans had known God long before the arrival of missionaries. Little wonder that the late Gambian scholar Lamin Sanneh attributed the successful implantation of Christianity in Africa to the facilitating role of ATR, most notably in respect of the missionary appropriation of African names of God in vernacular translations of the Bible. In his view, Christian expansion in Africa was 'virtually limited to those societies whose people had preserved the indigenous name for God' (Sanneh 2003:18). In his defence of Mbiti's continuity thesis,¹² Bediako (2000) affirmed Sanneh's logic (2003) of translatability.¹³ According to Bediako (2000:16), 'the God whose name had been hallowed in [African] indigenous languages in the pre-Christian tradition was found to be the God of the Bible, in a way that neither Zeus, nor Jupiter, nor Odin could be' (cf. Walls 2002:121). By thus arguing, Bediako (2000) affirmed Mbiti's explanation of the relationship

10 For instance, Samuel Kibicho of Kenya and the South African theologian Gabriel Setiloane posited radical continuity. The former argued that ATR possessed a saving knowledge of God, while the latter provided a rather unclear view in which he portrayed the Supreme Being of ATR as superior to the western Christian notion of God.

11 p'Bitek (2011:42) labelled these African theologians as intellectual smugglers, claiming that they Christianised and Hellenised the African deity. See also Donatus Nwoga's argument in his *The Supreme Being as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought* (1984) that the Supreme Being is a loan God introduced amongst the Igbo by Europeans.

12 See his *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (1992). This text is one of the most elaborate treatments of the theological significance of African pre-Christian religions.

13 If Sanneh speaks of translatability as a 'fundamental character of Christianity', Walls (2002:29) opined that the divine word is 'culturally infinitely translatable'.

between ATR and Christian that ATR served a preparatory role (*praeparatio evangelica*) for the Gospel. For Mbiti (1979:68), what the Gospel brought to Africa was Jesus Christ. Hence, Mbiti (1971:190) spoke of Jesus Christ as the 'final test for the validity and usefulness of any theological contribution' and that theology 'falls or stands on how it understands, translates and interprets Jesus Christ at a given time, place and human situation'. These early reflections laid the ground for the significance which Christology had in the subsequent history of African theology (see Mugambi & Magesa 1998). Nyamiti's (1989:17) remark that Christology is 'the most developed subject in today's African theology' illumines this observation.

3.2 Phase 2: Trinitarian implications of Christology

Following the creative reconstruction of the idea of God in ATR as discussed above, African theologians were faced with the task of clarifying who Jesus Christ was to the African. This was in part necessitated by a pastoral concern, namely, how to make the African Christian at home in the new faith. Given the extant literature on African Christology,¹⁴ I limit my analysis to the Trinitarian implications of the main trajectories of African Christological thinking. African Christologies have tended to develop along the lines of the variants of African theologies, namely inculturation, liberation and reconstruction.¹⁵ Inculturation theologians ascribed various honorific titles to Jesus, including ancestor,¹⁶ elder brother (*Kabesélé*), great chief (*Pobee*), guest (*udoh*), healer (*Appiah-Kubi*; *Kolié*), master of initiation (*Sanon*), Servant-King (*Ukachukwu Manus*) and revealer (*Ezigbo*). In African Christologies of liberation, the image of Christ as the liberator was foregrounded. This found expression within the three strands of African liberation theology, namely, liberation theology in Africa, south of the Limpopo river (see Ela 1986:87; Magesa

14 For useful overviews of African Christology, see Nyamiti's and other essays in *Jesus in African Christianity* (1989). See also Stinton's *Jesus of Africa* (2004) for recent perspectives.

15 Nyamiti (1989) identified two main approaches to African Christology, namely inculturation and liberation. Others, such as Stinton (2004), have categorised the various contemporary African Christologies under four models, namely Jesus as 'life-giver', 'mediator', 'loved one' and 'leader'.

16 Exponents of ancestral Christology include Benézét Bujo (Proto-Ancestor; Ancestor par Excellence), Charles Nyamiti (Brother-Ancestor), Kwame Bediako (Supreme Ancestor) and John Pobee (Jesus is *Nana*), amongst others. The concern of these theologians is captured in Pobee's (1979:81) question, namely 'Why should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe or nation?'

1989:151–163), African women's theology (Oduyoye 2002:98)¹⁷ and South African black theology (see Mofokeng 1987:42).¹⁸ Most recently, another approach to Christology has emerged, namely reconstructive Christology (see Mugambi 1995:90). Although Mugambi (1995:13) has not elaborated on reconstructive Christology, he intimates that the mission of Jesus of Nazareth was reconstructive. A more developed reconstructive Christology is articulated by the Congolese Lutheran theologian, Kä Mana (2004), who creatively integrates the motifs of identity and liberation. KäMana's Christology of abundant life foregrounds Christology as the heart of the reconstruction of African societies. Christ is the catalyst of reconstruction.

There are nevertheless many limitations to African Christologies, particularly those that employ what Nyamiti (1994:70) calls 'the comparative analogical method'. The first challenge relates to the necessary starting point of most African Christologies, namely, from below. African Christologies have tended to pay less attention to the divine ontology of Christ, and thus overlook the relationship between his divinity and humanity. This challenge is most pronounced in Christologies which employ the analogy of ancestor to illumine the mediatory role of Christ between God and humanity. These Christologies fail to capture the divinity of Christ, given the problematic associated with the theological interpretation of the identity of ancestors (see Stinton 2004:138, 156). An exceptional but not fully developed ancestral Christology that seeks to preserve the divinity of Christ is Bediako's (2000:25) ancestral incarnational Christology, which attempts to do so by emphasising the incarnation. The need for adequate African accounts of Jesus Christ as 'fully divine' has been variously intimated (see Nyamiti 1994:71; Pobee

17 Oduyoye speaks of Christ as the Agyenkwa, which means the one who rescues.

18 Given the South African black experience of oppression in the context of racist oppression and exploitation, Mofokeng's (1983:x) *Christology* is an exploration of how 'faith in Jesus Christ empower black people who are involved in the struggle for liberation'. Mofokeng reversed the Christological question from 'who do you say that I am?' to 'who do you say that I am and how can I be liberated to my authentic self?' Black Christology, according to Mofokeng (1983:243ff), starts in the dark lit stable and the manger in Bethlehem. Black theology's liberative praxis thus illumines the history of Jesus. Mofokeng's (1983) black Christology (necessarily from below) elaborates a theological anthropology that illumines the insurrection of the oppressed black humanity (the cross-bearers). Given the stress on black subjectivity, black Christology is black consciousness. Accordingly, Mofokeng (1983:259) depicts the resurrection of Christ as God's insurrection that inspires the oppressed people's insurrection against injustice. Mofokeng's (1983) *Christology* links the incarnation and resurrection as well as creation and salvation.

1979:85–98). Another limitation of ancestral Christologies relates to the changing sociocultural contexts in Africa in the face of modernisation and urbanisation. This concern illustrates the fate of some Christologies articulated by professional theologians, which are limited in their practical and pastoral significance for churches and Christian discipleship and mission. This concern has found expression in some recent contributions which call for methodological reorientation that takes a seriously grassroots perspective (see Stinton 2004:270–278).¹⁹ Further, given the charismatisation or pentecostalisation of mainline Christianity in Africa, African theologians also need to account for the Christologies of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa.²⁰

Liberation Christologies may also be charged with reductionism for apparently absolutising a particular dimension of oppression. For Nyamiti (1996:73), what is needed is integral liberation.

Notwithstanding the enduring issues in African Christology, African theologians have generally affirmed the creedal belief regarding the divinity and humanity of Christ. Nevertheless, several African Christological images and symbols are limited in giving expression to divine identity of Christ. If so, this begs further elaboration of how the Master of Initiation, the Ancestor par excellence, is the same as the God confessed as Truine.

3.3 Phase 3: A biblical understanding of who Christ is in himself ‘plunges us into the theology of the Trinity’ (Nyamiti)

From the foregoing analyses of the African discourses on the continuity of God and on Christology, it is evident that the focus on the continuity of God has not led to thoroughgoing Trinitarian reflections. As the Kenyan theologian Kombo (2007:15) contends, African Christians must view God not just within the confines of African concepts of God, but must also explore how ‘the incarnation and Pentecost radically modify their prior’ concepts of God (cf. Vahakangas 2002:70). In what follows, I discuss African Trinitarian hermeneutics with reference to three broad approaches, which are identified in the following manner. In the first approach, Trinitarian hermeneutics may be seen as a logical outcome of ancestral Christologies.

19 See, for instance, Clifton Clarke’s *African Christology: Jesus in Post-Missionary African Christianity* (2011), and Victor Ezigbo’s *Re-imagining African Christologies: Conversing with the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus in Contemporary African Christianity* (2010).

20 See, for instance, Cephas Omenyo’s brief discussion on the doctrine of charismatic renewal groups in his *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism* (2006).

The second includes the approaches which draw on African notions of relationality and communality. The third approach entails the retrieval of concepts from traditional African ontology to reinterpret the doctrine of Trinity.

3.3.1 *The symbol of the Trinity and ancestral analogy*

There are several attempts in Trinitarian hermeneutics to predicate on the ancestor analogy (see Bediako 2000:25–31; Nyamiti 1996; Oladipo 1996). The Tanzanian Roman Catholic priest Nyamiti (1989) developed a doctrine of the Trinity as an extension of his ancestor Christology. Nyamiti (1989:31) was convinced that ‘all truly profound theology must’ be ‘ultimately rooted in the Trinity’. Nyamiti (1984:19–20) opined that through Christ, God has become our ancestor. The ‘Father is the Ancestor of the Son, the Son is the Descendant of the Father’ and the Holy Spirit is the mutual Oblation between the two (Nyamiti 1996:55–56).²¹ The Father is ancestor and Christ is the ‘brother-ancestor’. In this vein, Christ’s ancestorship to humanity is rooted in the Trinity. Just as there is kinship in African ancestral relation, Nyamiti (1996:46) analogously spoke of ancestral kinship amongst the persons of the Trinity.

The Nigerian theologian Oladipo (1996) similarly employs [Yoruba] ‘ancestrology’ to propose an African conception of the Trinity. According to Oladipo (1996:114–115), ‘as God “the Great ancestor” is present and active through Christ “the Proto-Ancestor”, “the Proto-ancestor” continues to be present and active through the Holy Spirit – the Grand-Ancestor’. Further to the limitations of ancestor analogy noted in my discussion of Christology above, the use of ancestor analogy in Trinitarian hermeneutics has the danger of undermining a fully Trinitarian notion of God, given the challenge of subordinationism.

4. Trinitarian communion as model for church and society: Relational approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity

An approach that has found wider expression amongst African theologians is the appeal to the social analogy of the Trinity,²² often on the basis of

21 Nyamiti’s pneumatology appears close to Augustine’s mutual love theory.

22 The social analogy for the Trinity may be traced back to Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173) and has recently found expression in the Trinitarian theologies of several theologians, most notably Jurgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, John Zizioulas; Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine Mowry La Cugna, amongst others. Depicting the Trinity as an intimate community, the differing accounts of social Trinitarianism portray the Trinity as a model for social relations between humans. For instance,

communal orientation of most African contexts. The late Tanzanian Roman Catholic bishop Mwoleka (1975:204) opined that the Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved but rather an example to be followed. According to Mwoleka (1975), the 'three Divine Persons share everything in such a way that they are not three gods but only One'. And just as the three are one, Christ's wish is '[t]hat they (his followers) may be one as we are one'. Accordingly, he opined that the African philosophy of socialism, namely *Ujaama*, reflects the Trinity, as our understanding of the Trinity is inseparable to the sharing of life together.

Among African women theologians, Oduyoye (2000:141–145) has argued that the Trinity may be understood as offering an egalitarian model of female–male relations.²³ Without suggesting that the Trinity is indispensable, Oduyoye (2000) interprets the symbol of the Trinity as a model for society. Our baptism into the name of the Trinity, Oduyoye (2000:143) writes, 'means that we should stand not for monarchies and hierarchies but rather participation'. Other African women theologians critique the male language of the Trinity and argue that it not only reflects the patriarchal context in which it arose but also legitimises a male view of God, thus sustaining patriarchal relations.²⁴ The Nigerian theologian Orobator (2008) adds to this debate on the naming of God by drawing on a Yoruba maternal imagery namely *Obirinmeta*, to illumine God's pragmatic involvement in the daily existential needs of humanity. According to Orobator (2008:31), the symbol of *Obirinmeta* expresses the idea of 'a woman who combines the strength, character, personality, and beauty of three women ... She is a multifunctional woman of unmatched

based on an articulation of an ontology of personhood predicated on relationality (being as communion), orthodox metropolitan and theologian John Zizioulas articulates an understanding of the Trinity in terms of communion, and based on this he postulates the doctrine of the Trinity as a model for human life and ecclesiality. Similarly, Jurgen Moltmann expounds implications of the social doctrine of the Trinity not only for the church but also for the broader human community. For a critique of social Trinitarianism, see Kilby (2000).

23 In western theology, the problem of language about God has been vigorously addressed by a number of feminist theologians, most notably Elizabeth Johnson, Sallie McFague and Elisabeth Fiorenza, amongst others. For fuller discussion on the feminist deconstructive critique of patriarchal Trinitarian hermeneutics, see Neal (1996). See also Johnson (1984).

24 For instance, Dube (2012) has problematised how the gender-neutral Deity of Bantu was patriarchalised in Bible translations. Other African theologians such as Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator appropriate African maternal symbols in search of a pragmatic and gender-sensitive approach to understanding how the Triune God relates with us.

density and unbounded substance'. *Obirinmeta*, Orobator (2008:32) argues, 'symbolises the abundant and radical open-endedness of God in God's self and in our encounters of God'. Although one may argue that Orobator's (2008) use of *Obirinmeta* may be interpreted as a hermeneutics of appreciation, I wonder whether a hermeneutics of suspicion may not be best employed against his project. It appears that by appropriation of this female symbol, Orobator (2008) is unwittingly affirming the status quo of women's oppression in Africa.

Another reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity that draws on the African traditional understanding of community was articulated by the Nigerian Methodist theologian Ogbonnaya (1994). Unlike Oduyoye (2000) and Mwoleka (1975), Ogbonnaya (1994:60) brings an African communal worldview to bear upon the Trinitarian thought of the early North African theologian Tertullian, who interpreted the Trinity as a theory of divine community. Dissatisfied with the monotheistic accounts of God by notable African theologians such as Idowu and Mbiti on the one hand and polytheistic descriptions of the divine opined by Godfrey Leinhardt, among others, Ogbonnaya (1994:14–27) observes that although Africans have concepts of the *One* and the *Many*, the African understanding of God is neither monotheistic nor polytheistic. Instead, he proposed the concept of 'Divine communalism' as the most apposite category for explaining the Divine in the African context. Communality, Ogbonnaya (1994:89) argues, 'is the essence of the gods in African worldviews'. He (1994:23) infers that the Divine 'is a community of gods who are fundamentally related to one another and ontologically equal whilst at the same time distinct from one another by their personhood and functions'. By foregrounding the African perspective of the communality of the Divine as a community of equality, he suggests a correlation between African communality and relationality in the Trinity. However, as Conradie and Sakupapa (2018:46) argued, Ogbonnaya's construal of 'the African community of gods as identical with Trinitarian communion' is unclear. Further, that he appears to read sub-Saharan traditional notions of communality into Tertullian's North African world is most evident in his claim that the connection Tertullian makes between *unitas* and *substantia* is closer to the Bantu notion of Vital Force. Ogbonnaya's (1994:33, 37) attempt to speak on traditional African religions and communal orientation in ancient Egypt was equally problematic. This was partly illustrated in his use of the category of identity 'African Egyptian'.²⁵ As important as the Africanity of Tertullian may be, it is also the case that in his articulation of the doctrine

25 Compare Cheikh Anta Diop's argument that ancient Egypt was a Negro civilisation in his *The African Origin of Civilisation: Myth or Reality* (1974).

of the Trinity, Tertullian appropriated much from Greco-Roman thought. Nevertheless, although Ogbonnaya (1994) does not develop the theme of practical significance of the Trinity, he hints at a vision for human society modelled on the Divine community.

The monograph by Nigerian Lutheran theologian Bitrus (2017) is the most recent African attempt to unravel the implications of Trinitarian theology for Christian life, ecclesiology, sociopolitical life, socio-economic systems, and relations between women and men and the environment. The significance of Bitrus's (2017) Trinitarian hermeneutics lies in his reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity as a critique to patriarchal domination inherent in African communalism and the divisive challenges posed by ethnic and religious exclusivism in the African context. According to Bitrus (2017:187), 'an authentic African tradition of community is that which lives out the just, egalitarian, and inclusive life of the Triune God'. Accordingly, Bitrus (2017:56–159) reinterprets Trinitarian relationality as a moral model.

4.1 God as the Great Muntu: The Trinity and African metaphysics of Ntu

Another approach to the Trinity in contemporary African theology entails the retrieval of African concepts to express the Trinity. Kombo's (2007) work is instructive in this regard. Kombo's point of departure is that pioneer African theologians had not sufficiently pondered the discontinuities between Christian and pre-Christian African understandings of God. Kombo (2007:208) wonders how God as *Modimo*, *Nyame*, *Leza* and *Nyasaye* is the Triune God? For Kombo (2007:232), what is needed is Christianisation of the African notion of God. To do so, he suggested employing an African intellectual infrastructure to explain the Christianised concept, just as the early church Fathers did when they utilised the infrastructure of Greek philosophy. Therefore, drawing on an African ethnophilosophy²⁶ dubbed the metaphysics of *Ntu*, Kombo (2007) recasts the doctrine of the Trinity in other than Greek categories. Accordingly, Kombo (2007:243) names God as the Great *Muntu*, the Supreme Vital Force. The Great *Muntu*, Kombo (2007) argues, 'has oneness of *Ntu* and activity with the Son and the Holy Spirit':

The 'genuine Muntu' that the Son has, is the 'Great Muntu' himself. Thus, the Son is a perfect reflection of the 'Great Muntu', the Holy Spirit

26 His interlocutors for the metaphysics of *Ntu* include Placide Tempels, Alexis Kagame and Mulagowa Cikala to the notion of vital force. For a discussion of vital force as an African notion being, see Sakupapa (2012).

is a perfect reflection of the 'Great Muntu', and the Father is a perfect reflection of the 'Great Muntu' (Kombo 2007:245).

The originality of Kombo's (2007) work, notwithstanding his reinterpretation of the Trinity, seems to be a reinstatement of the western cultural articulation of the Trinity 'forced' to fit into terminology derived from the traditional African context. His formulations at times read like an 'African equivalent of Western dogmatic formulations' (Bediako 2004:159). Further, Kombo's (2007:236–247) description of Trinitarian fatherhood corresponds to a patriarchal model of the Trinity that depicts the Father as a source of divine community, thus tending towards subordinationism. Nevertheless, Kombo's (2007) originality in employing an African metaphysics is commendable, given its contribution to the debate on the problem of the language of person in Trinitarian theology. This is crucial to demonstrate that although some African theologians such as Mugambi (1995) have argued that the notion of 'person' in the Trinity is misleading (to an African) and must be discarded, the problem of the language of person is not a typically African problem.²⁷ The history of dogma illustrates that the development of the classic doctrine of the Trinity was a creative process that not only included linguistic borrowings but also that the language and grammar of Trinitarian theology was developed in the context of debate. Therefore, there is no reason why African theologians cannot introduce new terms if these are consistent with scripture. As Kombo (2016:46) argues: 'The actual nexus for any meaningful discourse on the doctrine of the Trinity ... is when we state in our own terms what we believe the Bible teaches.'

5. Conclusion

This contribution situated the modern African theological debate on the identity of God in the encounter of African Christians with the western translation of God through various missionary theologies. It highlighted three main approaches to Trinitarian hermeneutics in the African context. One may conclude that most African perspectives to the Trinity adopted

²⁷ For instance, unsatisfied with the modern sense of the concept 'person', namely 'a self-conscious will and activity center', to describe the traditional Trinitarian formula, Barth and Rahner (1974:103–115) suggested the notions of 'modes of being' (Seinsweisen) and 'distinct modes of subsisting' respectively. Some however argue that Barth and Rahner's positions in this regard represent a 'neo-modal Trinity model'. For Kasper (2012), what is needed is a concept of person that stresses relationality. Among others, Zizioulas's (1991b) thesis on the ontology of person is instructive.

the social analogy of the Trinity to draw implications of the doctrine for Christian life and society. The attempt to place the symbol of the Triune God in the public sphere (often on the basis of African communality and relationality) illustrates the importance of the social context in African theological method. However, the approach has its own limitations, as discussed above. As Conradie and Sakupapa (2018) argue, one of the challenges is that the

social implications derived from such an emphasis on communion are read into an understanding of communion without due cognisance of hierarchical relationships in terms of gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation and being able-bodied (Conradie & Sakupapa 2018:50).

Nevertheless, there is no given Trinitarian symbolism that could fully capture the mystery of God. At best, 'the confession of God as Triune serves as the doxological conclusion of the liturgy' (Conradie & Sakupapa 2018:53).