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Quest for Relevant African Theology

Towards an Ujamaa Theology (1)

INTRODUCTION :

Today there is a strong and a wide cry for a relevant theology for us Africans. This type of theology has been called African Theology. The term, African Theology, is confronted with some difficulty because it carries several nuances. Up to now there is a great lack of consensus as to what exactly African Theology is.

Motives for this Essay :

(i) Pluralism in Theology :

Having read several articles on African Theology, one point struck me most. It's the fact of pluralism in theology. Pope Paul VI made this point clear in his Address to the Catholic Bishops in Africa at Kampala 1969 that "... a certain pluralism is not only legitimate but desirable".² On African Theology, Father Charles Nyamiti makes the same point saying :

African Theology will necessarily include unity and an enriching variety of cultural expressions. This implies that it will involve a plurality of theologies, although it is difficult to foretell whether such plurality will consist of different theological schools corresponding to the same systems of thinking, or different theologies corresponding to different philosophical systems. An absolutely uniform African theology is an undesirable fiction.³

I agree with Father Nyamiti. Having also reflected on this, I came to the conclusion that such would, in fact, be fiction and, therefore less meaningful for at least four reasons :

(a) In Africa there are numerous tribes each with a different articulation in culture, customs, languages and belief patterns.

¹ — 'Towards an Ujamaa Theology' is an essay which appeared in a booklet called "MBIU YA CHAUTA", Vol. 1 September, 1975, No. 2, pp. 52-62. Camillus Lymo is a theology student in Kipalapala major seminary.

² — Pope Paul's Address, in Gaba Pastoral Paper No. 7, p. 50; also AFER Vol. XI, No. 4, 1969, pp. 402-405.

³ — Charles Nyamiti : "African Theology, Its Nature, Problems and Methods", Gaba Pastoral Paper No. 19, p. 2.

- (b) The problems facing us are not uniform, and obviously, the historical, social, political and the economic circumstances peculiar to each of us do not favour uniformity.
 - (c) The impact of the gospel message is neither even nor the same throughout the whole continent.
 - (d) Moreover, the theology expected from us is not merely an intellectual theoretical product in the fashion of mathematical principles, a cheap classroom work, possible, therefore, to teach on a continental scale. Instead, I think it must be **concrete life experience** which is scarcely uniform on a continental level.
- (ii) African Show-off ? :

Many observers from the west have asked : Can't the African contribute anything to the World Church ? On reading Father Aylward Shorter's article: "The African Contribution to World Church"⁴, one feels the question being asked. This is even more stipulated when he writes : "What we are now awaiting is an independent and original contribution from Africa itself".⁵ I feel there is a danger that in the spirit to answer the question we may set out in search of a theology (answer) in such a way that the consequent result is just 'an intellectual show-off' or 'competition' between Africans and Europeans. If it happens, I think the resulting theology will be useless and difficult to understand. It will not answer the existential problems arising from our varying historical circumstances. Remaining on the level of 'intellectual gymnastics' it will tend to brush aside our aspirations. In the people's life, Christianity will continually remain disincarnated. But we are reminded by the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar about what is needed :

Our own theological thought which tries to answer the questions raised by our diverse historical contexts and the actual evolution of our societies; a theological thought which is at one and the same time faithful to the traditions of the Church and respectful of our traditions and languages, that is, our philosophies . . . Only an African theology authentic to the fundamental aspirations of the African peoples shall effectively make Christianity incarnated in the life of the people of Africa.⁶

⁴ — Aylward Shorter W. F. : "The African Contribution to World Church, and Other Essays in Pastoral Anthropology", Gaba Pastoral Paper No. 22, pp. 1-9.

⁵ — Ibidem, p. 5.

⁶ — Quoted also from Rev. Richard Cote's article : "Seminary Education in Africa", AFER Vol. 17, May 1975, No. 3, p. 135.

(iii) Necessity of Independent Thought :

If African theology is to come of age according to Father Cote, "More initiative and independent thought will be required — with all the consequent problems of mistakes and failures".⁷ This speaks volumes. If we need a relevant theology for us, we must take the pains ourselves. It's imperative that we reflect jointly and very seriously within our actual life conditions. If that is settled — and here lies the crux of the entire process — we need not, and not at all, to take our formulations and expressions to Europe or elsewhere for corrections. In the struggle to be our own, mistakes will unavoidably occur. Let the Europeans not always criticise us. Let the mistakes be ours as those of Europe or America have always remained theirs. On our part we need self — confidence.

Attempts at Localization :

This deals directly with Ujamaa Theology. My thought on Ujamaa theology was partly induced by the fact that the Ujamaa-socialism way of life has its own system of philosophical thought. It's also a clear possible option for the plurality of theology. Further, it presents a striking presence of Providence, indeed, a visible sign of grace, which is even notable in the words of Bishop Christopher Mwoleka : " I shall not let this chance slip out of our hands ".⁸

At this juncture, it's notable that if uniformity of theology for the whole of Africa is undesirable, then a situation as experienced in an ujamaa context calls for a ' localization of theology '.⁹ Tanzania which experiences the Ujamaa impact more than any other country in Africa could develop a theology in the line of Ujamaa, which may be authentic and faithful to the people's aspirations. If this becomes relevant by answering their problems, it could then be shared by other Christians in countries whose problems whether political, social, historical or economic share the same evolution. At such a level, theology shall be concretely ' localized ' and ' contextualized '.¹⁰

— Ibidem, p. 136.

— Bishop Christopher Mwoleka : " Trinity and Community ", AFER Vol. 17, July 1975, No. 4, p. 206.

9 — AMECEA Documentation Service, No. 8 August 1975, pp 3-4, at the SECAM meeting.

10 — Kofi Appiah-Kubi : " Why African Theology ? ", AACCC Bulletin, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1974, p. 6.

A speculation on Ujamaa theology was also sparked off by a series of touchy questions which are found below :

- Why and for how long shall we break our heads on theologies whose life situations are predominantly European or foreign and actually so much removed from our own life situations ?
- To what extent has theological thinking inside Africa taken our life conditions seriously ?
- Why are we unable up to this moment in history to have our own theology which answers the problems that haunt us in our experience of christian vocation and witness ?
- And how did such theologies as political theology of liberation, of hope and attention, of development and economics, of progress and all others come into existence ?

These and many other questions moved me. The first idea that came into my mind was a question : What about an Ujamaa Theology ?

The Values of Ujamaa :

Although Ujamaa is largely a political trend, we cannot neglect her contribution to theology simply because of her political nature. Ujamaa is an attitude of mind. But concretely, it's a way of life. Yet, Ujamaa is a form of socialism which has been adapted to the social, historical and economic situations in Africa. It's the basis of African socialism. Ujamaa's way of life aims at transforming human society in order to escape tangibly the shameful low standards of living.¹¹

The values of Ujamaa are centred upon the basic belief in the equality of men, upon the reality and sense of community, freedom, sharing and love.

These are all in all Christian. The struggle to achieve them and to transform human existence is Christian. Does the entire process mean anything to us who toil to create a theology relevant for us ?

¹¹ — Nyerere K. J. : *Ujamaa Essays on Socialism*, O.U.P. Dar es Salaam, 1968, pp. 1-78 (especially).

The Notion of Theology :

Definitions differ as there are theologians. But taking St. Anselm's, theology is : 'Faith seeking understanding'. When a people have accepted faith in Christ and the Christian principles themselves capable of changing their way of living, they then reflect on their faith in order to make the transformation of their lives come true in their particular situation. The message of Christ is received according to the milieu and manner of the receiver. His reflections on it must be Catholic or Christian. Yet, it's impossible outside his very situation. For it's only when the people have incarnated Christ's message in their own milieu, that it transforms them. Hence theology is a reflection of one's faith in Christ in a concrete situation, so as to transform oneself to make **Christian Witness real.**

Our Situation :

Our situation in this political, social and economic plane is that in Africa there are **real poor** human conditions. There is exploitation, injustice, and discrimination, which together are qualities bitterly uncompromising to whatever is conceivably a true humanity. These and others have contributed to Africa being '**quite a late comer**' in the world of development. Yet, history and science has it that the first man lived in Africa. Providentially perhaps, I think the impact of this first man in Africa has remained unfortunate in the course of history to this day because :

While others are taking a further and a greater step into development;
for most of us it is a start !

While others are advanced in knowledge; the majority of our own people
are lamentably ignorant !

While others are healthy and happy because they have adequate medical
care and enough food; many of our children together with their
parents are ill, miserable, and in fact, many die because of acute
hunger and disease !

While others are able, for instance, to change their clothes even twice
a day; a great many people of ours go almost naked !

While others may be puzzled what to do with their wealth, we on the
other hand are puzzled, about what a poor people we are !

¹² — Rev. Laurenti Magesa : "Return to the World, Towards a Theocentric Existentialism in Africa", AFER, Vol. XVI, 1974, No. 3, p. 278.

While others are actually honoured for their contribution in transforming the world; we in Africa are despised, discriminated against and oppressed for lack of authenticity and initiative !

While in history, through political, historical, social and economic changes in its people, the Church in the advanced countries is mature theologically, financially and so on; in Africa, she is so imperfect, immature in theology and perhaps indifferent to changes and so on . . . , that the faithful's future hope is diminished and hardly visible !

This is the situation confronting the believer. Christ's message has to transform him and the world he knows. The Church on the other hand has a role to play, that is, to look at the recipient of the faith. To cite Father Magesa :

No matter where the Church turns her head in Africa, she is confronted with Christ hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned and generally alienated for lack of education opportunities, public services and suffering from civil wars and coups. ¹²

This said, we humbly ask : What kind of theology is relevant for this people ? In the context of Ujamaa, the basic values already mentioned and which are now being preached, have foundation in the traditions and history of mankind. Should we be indifferent to Ujamaa ? Can those Christians actively engaged in the campaign to change the awful life situations of the Wajamaa find a theological backing ? Precisely, in their context, what is the relevant theology for the Wajamaa ?

A Relevant Theology :

Different theologies have come into existence by the people's reflections on their faith in Christ, in their own historical conditions. But what makes a theology relevant for a people? Undoubtedly, each single theology revolves around the Mystery of Christ. Hence every single theology is relevant in its own unique way in so far as it answers the problems of its people in their faith in Christ. Further, I think that relevancy is determined by the consequent transformation brought about by the encounter between God and man. This is best visible in human communities. Finally this finds expression in the human language we call theology.

An Ujamaa Theology :

By the term 'An Ujamaa Theology', I wish to talk about the possibility of creating a theology centred upon the basic belief in the equality of men, sense of community, freedom, sharing and real love. These five elements are consonant with any real christian living. Thus they are uniquely relevant for the Wajamaa Christians. They are part and parcel of a sound theology because they are found both in the Scriptures and in the official teachings of the Church.

For this matter, it's not meant to be a theology of Ujamaa politics or Ujamaa economics. Yet, certain overtunes of Ujamaa politics will prevail, because we are never completely free from the ties of our political and economic environment. An Ujamaa Theology, therefore, is an attempt to consider how man, in his capacity to share as a **being-in-community**, ordered by divine will, can truly make life worth living on this earth of grass and dust, thus answering God's call in Creation in Genesis 1:28, "Fill the earth and conquer it".

A Call to All :

Theology is born out of ideas and reflections. Unless the intellectuals of Africa in all fields share ideas and enrich each other there will scarcely be creativity.

Shared reflections give way to a system of patterned thought. This in turn gives way to conviction and conviction to action. Ujamaa theology calls the politician, the theologian, the philosopher, the poet, the musician, the rural farmer, the tribal elder, and the woman, indeed, everybody of good will to the sharing of ideas. Perhaps it's due to the inadequate sharing of ideas among ourselves (Africans) that render us silent and dependent on the thought of others such that there is no mutual, spontaneous enrichment. Father A. Shorter is right when he says that theses of Africans lie scattered in the university libraries of Europe and America, and their authors have not been able to influence each other.¹³

Proposed Characteristics of an Ujamaa Theology :

Every theology has its marked characteristics which depend upon the place of origin, the Church's activity in that place, the historical circumstances and so forth. What then are the possible and conspicuous characteristics of an Ujamaa Theology? Below I give some :

¹³ — Gaba Pastoral Paper No. 22, op. cit. p. 5.

(i) **Historical :**

An Ujamaa theology has to be historical because it's obliged to take into account the historical circumstances proper to her. The history we now make by raising the standards of living of our people point to the future. It's the history characteristic of an Ujamaa theology. Theology has to be born within it. Why not? The term Ujamaa began to be used in Tanzania. It bears fruit within the history of Tanzania. And history plunges us into the past, situates us in the present and directs our hopes into the future. The future must be better than the present or otherwise there is no reason to look up to it. And since our Ujamaa theology concerns man's sharing power in community in terms of tangible development and liberation, doubtlessly, this growth takes place in history. History is a process towards a definite reality. We must have faith in our history or else the reality to which we aspire becomes illusive. For me, history is a vital characteristic of this proposed theology because all theology has in fact become history, and our point of reference will always be history.

(ii) **Sharing :**

Sharing is part of the whole economy of salvation. That's why man is saved in a community. It's also an affirmation of the basic equality of men. To be a member of a community means to enter into the sharing of relationships; into the sharing of wealth or riches; of talents and especially work. It means also sharing of the burdens; the failures as well as the success of that community. Thus, a theology built on the reality of community must be characteristically sharing. Ujamaa by itself is distributive. That is sharing in the concrete. It means mutual, true brotherly enrichment.

(iii) **Communal :**

The concrete man is 'man-in-community'. This is affirmed by the Church's teaching :

God did not create man for life in isolation, but for the formation of social unity

This communitarian character is developed and consummated in the work of Jesus Christ. For the very Word made flesh willed to share in the human fellowship. ¹⁴

14 — The Documents of Vatican 11, THE CHURCH TODAY, article 32,

Further illumination on the community nature of man is based on the life of the Trinity. Though for us a knowledge on the life of the Trinity is indeed little, yet, we can say that the most perfect community or "ujamaa" is the Trinity. The Trinity establishes God as community. Jesus Christ revealed the Trinity to us. God wished to share with humanity and the entire creation his own 'community life' in the person of Jesus Christ who become consubstantial with us. Our life is a shared life in the Trinity. But for us we now ask: How is this possible outside what is for us a tangible shared existential community life on this earth? It seems quite acceptable that a movement which probes the realization of community life is concordant with the "plan of God". That's why in Tanzania today, the Church is rethinking herself. She now moves to establish "small christian communities", and to my mind, a sound theology behind this process can only be envisaged in the new way offered by Ujamaa.

(iv) **Love centredness :**

An Ujamaa theology must be love centred. Without love community is meaningless and sharing is impossible. By love we mean Christian love or brotherly love. According to Acts 17:28 love is the place where we live, move and exist. It is life in Christ. It is a dynamic, transforming power within man. It is the basis for understanding the nature of human community. It is true in a community to say that there is not true love outside God.

In the daily encounter of men and men, indeed our personal encounter with fellow men, is our encounter with God. This comes true in love. Loving one's neighbour is loving God. Jesus Christ taught us to love in concrete, that is, to concretize charity, to liberate man from his afflictions.

In this line of thought, Ujamaa efforts become salvific. In love, the freedom of each individual will be respected, safeguarded and promoted. The theology of the Church, indeed the Church herself will become the confirmation of the LOVE OF GOD to all men.

(v) **Practical prophetism :**

My last proposed characteristic of Ujamaa theology is practical - prophetism. To be sound any theology must be prophetic and practical. The Church by nature is prophetic. Hence her theology is prophetic and practical. The prophets of the Old Testament were practical people. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ, was the prophet par excellence. He was critical. He just didn't accept everything the people of his time considered to be ideal. And having said that

each single theology revolves around the Mystery of Christ, then, all theologies are or must be prophetic, critical and practical. St Paul speaking to the Corinthians on prophets, 1 Cor. 14: 3-4, said :

The man who prophesies does
talk to other people, to their
improvement, their encouragement,
and their consolation , he
does so for the benefit of the
community.

In the process of creating better human communities, aberrations do occur. Prophets are needed to criticise in order to improve things and that's where Ujamaa theology seeks to be prophetic and practical. To reiterate, this springs from the nature of the Church. Thus the task of a "mjamaa christian" in the building of human communities is to criticise notwithstanding that he must not criticise as an onlooker, rather as one consciously and willfully, here and now, hard working and hard sharing to bring about transformation as truly desired by God.

The Sources of an Ujamaa Theology :

Though there may be other sources, for the time being we can only afford to talk about two, namely :

(a) Scripture :

Scripture is an indispensable source of any theology and, therefore, our proposed Ujamaa theology because it's the soul of all theology — (Document on Priestly Formation, Vat. 11, art. 16.) The five elements or values in ujamaa are found in the Scriptures. Unfortunately, the scope of this essay does not permit them extensive biblical treatment.

Biblically, Israel survived all the possible annihilating calamities because she remained a **unique community** that shared one belief in ONE GOD, — Is. 44 : 6-8. Their sense of community reached climax in Jesus Christ of the New Testament, who can be understood as representing 'to-be-in-community'. We could say this meant to be one among the people, to share their history and their hardships, also sharing in their efforts to develop themselves, especially in fighting whatever dehumanizes even to the point of giving one's own life for that cause !

In the **Mystery of Sharing within the Trinity Community**, and concretely, **sharing among men of his age in his earthly life**, Jesus Christ, very deliberately

chose the apostles as his co-sharers, — Mt. 4: 18-22. . . Hence, in the midst of Jesus's sharing in the Trinity and humanity, (consider the incarnation and the specific sharing with the apostles) Jesus, by his death and resurrection transformed the whole creation and the rest of human relationships acquired new life. Briefly, (and I am aware it's very inadequate) this forms our Biblical ground for a speculation on an Ujamaa theology.

(b) The Politico-socio-economic life setting :

It is an abortive endeavour to situate man in community outside the bounds of political, social and economic influences. Political ideologies, social patterns and economic structures are all instruments of development. Since development is consequent to the cry for transformation, or better living, then, a theology that stresses man's sharing power as a **being-in-community** in the light of Christ's life and activity cannot be indifferent to what the community's political, social and economic thought contributes. If it does, it then runs the risk of stripping itself of its basic sharing character. It then remains traditionally individualistic looking down upon the political, social and economic patterns of life as profane, and so robs theology of its prophetic aspect.

Conclusion

The proposed Ujamaa theology envisages a growing tendency among communities to depart from the traditional way of life. Instead of accumulated wealth which may be termed 'personal wealth', distributed wealth is becoming more and more the cry of people who want to be in a community. Instead of one man deciding for the masses, the masses themselves are tending toward a collective, rather a shared decision.

Instead of distinguishing mathematically sacred history and profane history, there is at it were, one history, the history already lived by Christ, still operative in our own history now. Instead of theology becoming a sort of directive from the above and possibly a set of doctrinal formulas or statements, it's perhaps more and more issuing from the people, constituting a life shared experience, a concrete expression of what the people are. In this way we may hope to have a serious African Theology that is relevant to the people.

(For Discussion questions, see page 153)



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