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*The Challenge of Mother Tongue
for African Christian Thought*

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The Challenge of Mother Tongue for African Christian Thought

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Themes of future issues:

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Biblical Exegesis in African Perspective



Guest Editorial

Kwame Bediako

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In concluding the 'Prolegomena' to his *Toward an African Theology*, John S. Pobee stated what was obviously a deeply-held yearning, yet also a profound dilemma:

Ideally, African theologies should be in the vernacular. Language is more than syntax and morphology; it is the vehicle for assuming the weight of a culture. Therefore this attempt to construct an African theology in the English language is the second best, even if it is convenient if it should secure as wide a circulation as possible.¹

As it turned out, Pobee went on to make copious use of Akan proverbs, wise sayings and maxims in his endeavour to illuminate various areas of Christian doctrine.

In an era of globalisation, the convenience of securing 'as wide a circulation as possible' may present itself as particularly attractive, and for some, may even appear to be the only viable course to take. Yet if the tenor of the articles in this issue of the *Journal of African Christian Thought* is a reliable indicator, then one may not expect that the dilemma posed will be resolved by the mere adoption of what amounts to the 'second best' solution, if the aim in view is to nurture a vigorous and confident African Christian thought that will, in turn, underpin effective Christian action in society.

It will not be difficult to build a case for the rightness of cultural preservation and conservation in a global world, and advance reasons why any collusion in the withering of mother tongues in favour of so-called global or world languages should be resisted. One may even argue that the attempt to say in one language the exact equivalent of what has been said in another language is an impossibility, and that the suppression of mother tongues in favour of so-called global languages, far from enhancing intellectual culture, in actual fact contributes to its impoverishment. If, as Pobee's statement indicates, one has to allow for conception and gestation before expression in the appropriate cultural forms of a language, then acquiescing in the 'second best' solution can only entail loss for all. But this must also mean that the limitation that the acceptance of a so-called global linguistic medium imposes on intellectual reflection and discourse may not be regarded as an unmixed blessing, even if 'it should secure as wide a circulation as possible'.

Accordingly, the issue can be said to transcend the concerns of cultural preservation and conservation in a global world, valid as those concerns may indeed be. It can be argued that the historical claims of Christian faith to universality, premised not on the uniformity of its manifestations but on their cultural plurality, concede the primacy of mother tongues; in other words, for Christian thought to acquiesce, however minimally, in the marginalisation of mother tongues, is tantamount to acting against the Christian faith's own best understanding of its claim to universal relevance and applicability. All this means that Christian theology, as the articulation and explication of the claims that Christian

believers make regarding their experiences of transcendence according to the Christian views of such realities, cannot set aside lightly the challenge of mother tongues, since these provide the historical, socio-cultural, intellectual and emotional matrices that give shape to the human responses to transcendence. The challenge is particularly acute in a post-colonial (and post-missionary) Africa, where the widespread acceptance and use of Western languages as a result of the Western impact, conceals the fact that contemporary African Christianity has emerged and is sustained largely through means that have been shaped by African mother tongues – the Bible translated into African languages, and African Christian preaching, conveyed through African languages.²

This is why the articles in this issue may be taken to indicate a hopeful sign that, for an emergent generation of African Christian scholars, the challenge of the mother tongue cannot be avoided.

The paper by Ben Quarshie is a timely and probably salutary message that the discipline of Biblical Studies may not be considered to be confined within the study of ancient documents in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Though it is not fully articulated, the notion that the Christian Scriptures are translatable and capable of being apprehended in different cultures substantially as what they are held to be – the word of God – can be presupposed to underlie his paper. On this basis, if the mother-tongue Scriptures enable the word of God to be heard, received and integrated into life, then there is no reason to expect Biblical Studies to side-step in-depth exploration into mother-tongue Scriptures as integral to Biblical Studies. Making the case pointedly in relation to African Christianity, Quarshie argues that if mother tongues inform and shape the response to the message of the Bible in Africa, then 'the way for Biblical Studies to fulfil its mandate in the African context lies in its ability to meet the challenge posed by the mother-tongue Scriptures'.

Sam Tshehla's paper forms a logical sequel to Ben Quarshie's. But it sets the challenge of mother tongue in sharper focus, probably as a result of the peculiar conditions of South African (even post-apartheid) life. Tshehla's paper seeks to communicate a felt need for taking seriously mother-tongue theologising or theological reflection, by focusing on the importance of mother-tongue exegesis of Scripture for such an endeavour. For Tshehla, 'the majority of ordinary African Christians are reading and expounding the Bible in their own mother tongues'. In their oral, unwritten and unsystematic forms, these efforts 'do not fit the grid of (Western) scholarship'. According to Tshehla, by ignoring these efforts, 'we have lost centuries' worth of African reflections on the Bible in their natural ambience'. Going a stage further than this sustained defence of his thesis about the fundamental theological imperative of mother-tongue exegesis, Tshehla, as a Mosotho, concludes by providing a Sesotho abstract of his article!