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**Christ in African Experience -
Reflections from Homeland and
Diaspora**

Journal of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre
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Christ in African Experience - Reflections from Homeland and Diaspora.

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Themes of future issues:

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Christian Worship in African Perspective

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African Indigenous Knowledge Systems as Resource for Theological Education and Christian Scholarship



Guest Editorial: Lived Christology

Kwame Bediako

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Nearly forty years ago, John Mbiti set out what he considered should be a benchmark of the then emergent 'Christian Theology in Africa':

The final test for the validity and usefulness of any theological contribution is Jesus Christ. Since His Incarnation, Christian Theology ought properly to be Christology, for Theology falls or stands on how it understands, translates and interprets Jesus Christ, at a given time, place and human situation.¹

Elsewhere, Mbiti also wrote that it was in the unique personality of Jesus Christ that is found the one 'external, absolute and timeless denominator' that provides the 'goal and standard for individuals and [hu]mankind'. Accordingly, it was in this fundamental and universal significance of Jesus Christ that Mbiti considered the Christian faith to hold 'the greatest and the only potentialities of meeting the dilemmas and challenges of modern Africa, and of reaching the full integration and manhood of individuals and communities'.²

At the time, the predominant concern in the early literature of African theology with the probings and theological interpretations of the pre-Christian primal religious traditions of Africa was viewed by some observers as an unhealthy, inward-looking preoccupation with an imagined African past. One of the best informed critics, the late Adrian Hastings, noted with concern that 'areas of traditional Christian doctrine which are not reflected in the African past disappear or are marginalized'. He pointed particularly to the absence of serious discussion on Christology.³ John Mbiti also shared this view, lamenting that 'mission Christianity' in Africa seemed to have produced a church that was 'trying to exist without a theology ... and without theological consciousness and concern'.⁴

Yet, looking back now on nearly half a century of African Christian thought, it is extraordinary how significant John Mbiti, pioneer that he was, would also become in appreciating the new perceptions that were to emerge. For, nearly twenty years after his critical remarks about the church in Africa, Mbiti felt able to write:

The Christian way of life in Africa to stay, certainly within the foreseeable future, [and] much of the theological activity in Christian Africa is being done as oral theology (in contrast to written theology) from the living experiences of Christians. It is theology in the open, from the pulpit, in the market place, in the home as people pray or read the Scriptures ... African Christianity cannot wait for written theology to keep pace with it. Academic theology can only come afterwards and examine the features retrospectively in order to understand them.⁵

It is probably not difficult to see here that it was the deeper insight, deriving from Mbiti's own uncanny African intuition, that had caught up with him: 'Cattle are born with ears, their horns grow later!'⁶ Indeed, as from the 1980s, it was evident that African Christian thought was making a transition from the earlier interest in the issues of identity and religious and cultural continuity and/or discontinuity, and was achieving a christological concentration that

was quite remarkable.⁷ However, what was also unmistakable was that the terms of the christological discussion showed that the categories being applied were derived directly from the apprehension of reality and the transcendent as experienced within the world-views of African primal religions. The common category of 'Ancestor' as a christological title was one such evident pointer, a clear indication that the earlier concentration on achieving a theological interpretation of the pre-Christian religious tradition had been appropriate. The new christologies became meaningful only as they were related to the achievements of the preceding generation of writers.

This connection of African christological discussion with the pioneer theologians of the formative phase of modern African Christian thought may, indeed, be symbolic.⁸ For it shows that African theology may well have been right to follow its own trajectory, instead of being stamped into 'producing a theology', under constant flogging from external critical observers who were impatient with Africa largely because they were without understanding of the African church. But perhaps the misconception may also have been with the processes whereby Christian thought itself grows. It is instructive to recall that in the early Christian centuries, the church seemed to have lived and witnessed without a 'systematic theology' until Origen's *De Principiis*!

The present issue of *Journal of African Christian Thought*, therefore, has appropriately as its theme: 'Christ in African Experience', in an attempt to give account of the actual 'lived Christology' of African Christians. All the articles incorporate a criticality that is required if these various African experiences of Christ are to be adequately probed for due insights, as well as the discernment of deficiencies. And yet, all this is done without silencing the voices of the prime subjects of these experiences – African Christians, individuals and communities of faith, living their experiences of Christ in the day-to-day realities and challenges of life, precisely where the faith must live. The outcome is a rather unusual collection of studies and investigations of 'lived Christology'. They provide the abiding vital data for appreciating the continuing relevance of Christian life at the specific level of religious experience, but also as the engine of a vibrant and innovative intellectual response to the complexities and multi-faceted nature of modern life.

Clifton Clarke is a Church Mission Society theological educator of West Indian parentage, raised and educated in the United Kingdom, but now working in Ghana. Clarke's article demonstrates that learning to appreciate African 'oral Christology' in a post-missionary setting among African Indigenous Churches can be exceptionally illuminating and intellectually stimulating. Christian theology is not captive to the categories and methods that have hitherto shaped it in the now passing Western phase.

Deji Ayegboyan is a Yoruba Christian scholar who teaches in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His critical yet sympathetic exposition of Aladura grass-roots Christology