Listening to the elders of African Theology: *Ubuntu* and Trinitarian theology as a response to the call for the integration of inculturation and liberation theologies.

Dr. Nontando Hadebe

1. Introduction

There is an African proverb that says 'if you refuse the advice of an elder you will walk until sunset.' The proverb contains both advice and warning for those seeking to pursue a new undertaking. One is advised to heed the counsel of the elders and warned that failure to do so will result in aimless wondering or failure. Taking heed of the advice of this proverb, this paper will consult the elders of African theology as the starting point in the search for new horizons. The pioneering elders in African theology were responding to oppressive contexts of colonialism and apartheid. As a result two types of theologies emerged namely inculturation in response to colonialisation and black liberation theologies in response to apartheid in South Africa. Inculturation theologies confronted the denigration of African religions and traditions by colonialists and aspects of missionary theologies as a crucial step in the struggle against colonialism while black liberation theologies confronted racism embodied in the political and economic oppression of Africans. Partnerships were formed between black theologians and other liberation theologians from Latin America and United States of America particularly African- American black theologies. These networks of solidarity brought African theologies in contact with 'global elders' committed to liberation. New challenges to these theologies emerged from the post independence or liberation era calling for an integration of inculturation and liberation theologies. African women theologians joined women's rights movements in Africa calling for gender equality and an end to cultural practices and beliefs that were oppressive to women. The call for integration was also echoed by other theologians concerned with the continued oppression and suffering of African people in post colonial Africa. In response to the call for integration of inculturation and liberation theologies this paper will propose a critical integration of a cultural belief and practice *ubuntu* with Trinitarian theology particularly Social Models of the Trinity as a resource for a culturally embedded liberation theology. One of the main

reasons for choosing these two symbols is that both *Ubuntu* and Trinity are central to their respective traditions and are the basis of beliefs on what it means to be human. Significantly both emphasize community, relationality, interdependence, ethics and unity. *Ubuntu* is expressed in the axiom *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person because of others) and *imago dei* expresses the Christian belief that a person is made in the image of God and since the Christian God is Trinity, a communion of three equal persons who constitute the one God, the *imago dei* is communitarian, relational and connected 'interdependence'. However in relation to liberation both *ubuntu* and the Trinity seem to have been domesticated and excluded in liberation discourse. For example *ubuntu* is often applied to post conflict contexts to restore harmony, reconciliation and forgiveness as epitomized in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Similarly Trinitarian theology since its creedal formulation in the fourth century has been 'locked' in complex philosophical terminology that has rendered it incomprehensible. The result according to Karl Rahner is that the Trinity occupies an "isolated position in the total dogmatic system…..It is as though this mystery has been revealed for its own sake, and that even after it has been made known to us, it remains, *as a reality*, locked up within itself" (1986:14). Rahner and other contemporary Trinitarian theologies particularly those espousing Social Models of the Trinity (SMT) have sought to "render the doctrine less abstract, more intelligible, and more relevant to the Christian faith" (Cunningham 2003:20). This paper will propose a critical dialogue between *ubuntu* and Trinitarian theology as an example of new horizons in African theologies that are in continuity with the spirit of the founding elders by being culturally embedded, contextual and liberating so that the African experience of Christianity may indeed by 'life and life in abundance' (John 10:10).

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Accordingly the rest of the paper will critically discuss these issues in four sections namely: firstly a brief overview of African theologies; secondly *ubuntu* and Trinitarian theology; thirdly intergration of *ubuntu* and Trinitarian theology as a model for integration of inculturation and liberation theologies and lastly conclusion.

2. African Theology: the voices of the elders

As mentioned in the introduction, African theologies developed in response to theological as well as contextual factors on the continent. Theologically, the pioneering elders such as Tshibangu argued for the establishment of African theology in continuity with precedents set in the history of Christianity when the original message framed in Jewish religious and cultural worldviews was translated into Greek forms and philosophy for the benefit of new converts who where Greeks. Similarly in the African context, the Christian faith has to be translated into African beliefs and worldviews (2003:193). The following definition of African theology from one of the elders, Charles Nyamiti reflects this foundational commitment,

> In its broad sense, African Christian theology can be defined as the understanding and expression of the Christian faith in accordance with African needs and mentality. In its narrow or strict sense, African Christian theology is the systematic and scientific presentation or elaboration of the Christian faith according to the needs and mentality of the African peoples (1994:63).

The initial intent by the elders to translate Christianity in the African context in response to African realities is foundational to African theologies and needs to be retained in the search for new horizons.

Contextually, as discussed in the introduction, African theologies in their pioneering stages where shaped by their immediate contexts of oppression. As noted earlier this resulted in two distinct theologies inculturation and black liberation theologies. Martiney describes these developments as follows,

> The African search for authentic and prophetic theology has at once been a *rejection* of the dominant Western theological paradigms and an *acceptance* of African realities and worldview in theological hermeneutics. Consequently in Black Africa, African theology and South African, Black theologies have come to represent two different schools of theological hermeneutics. They are therefore not synonymous. Expressed respectively in terms of "inculturation" (or "Africanization" or "indigenization") and "liberation," there has thus been a tension or polarity between these two theological traditions since the early 1970s (1993:xi).

These differences as indicated in the above quotation have separated these theologies from each other and create an untenable division that dichotomizes African life in two discrete categories of 'culture' and 'material' that is political, economic and social. Culture as will be discussed is often viewed as static and above critique. Yet, despite their differences, these theologies were according to Oladipo protest theologies that offered a "counter discourse" to apartheid, colonization and certain forms of western missionary theologies (2006:356). In their different ways these theologies inspired their generation of Christians to be active in liberation struggles in their different contexts. Hence liberation and transformation of concrete material structures of oppression is another critical legacy from the elders that also needs to be retained in the search for new horizons in African theologies. The challenge to bring these theologies together came from within and outside of African theologies, primarily as noted in the introduction from women theologians and activists, post colonial cultural scholars and elders within African theologies. These challenges will be discussed separately.

Firstly the challenge from women activist-theologians represented by *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* (hereinafter referred to as *The Circle*) who challenged 'gender blindness' and uncritical appropriation of African culture in African theologies. According to Kanyoro culture is "a double-edged sword" with both liberating and oppressive elements (2002:13). Masenya argues that colonialism and capitalism "only served to reinforce the patriarchy inherent in the African culture. It is an indisputable fact that African culture, like all other patriarchal cultures, has a low view on women" (2000:69). Similarly but with a different emphasis, Musa Dube contends that the "first things first" approach adopted during the struggle against colonialism made liberation a first priority and demanded solidarity between women and men tended to ignore gender oppression within African society (1999:216). As a result women's experiences of oppressive were marginalised in both pre and post independence eras and in African theology. The main goal of the circle is as stated earlier to address this exclusion. Accordingly Phiri's definition of African women's theology centralizes liberation:

> African women's theologies are a critical, academic study of the causes of women oppression; particularly a struggle against societal, cultural and religious patriarchy. They are committed to the eradication of all forms of oppression against women through a critique of the social and religious dimensions both in African culture and Christianity (2004:156).

In addition to defining women's theologies, Phiri outlines the target areas with include not only religion and culture but the wider social context that includes politics, economics.

The second challenge to uncritical appropriation of culture comes from post colonial African scholars like Makang who challenge the ahistorical and static views of culture that deprive culture of its role and capacity in addressing multiple challenges in contemporary Africa. He uses the term mystification of culture to refer to a view of culture that is orientated towards the past and renders culture above critique as well as incapable of confronting "the problem of political oppression and of economic injustice perpetrated by autocratic African regimes"(1997:331). Like the theology of *The Circle* there is an appeal to recognize the contradictory role of culture as both liberative and oppressive.

The third and last challenge is from within African theology, among the elders who advocate for the inseparability of inculturation and liberation. These elders include Jean Mark Éla, Engelbert Mveng and Bénézet Bujo. Éla questions the reduction of inculturation to culture only: "But why should the incarnation of faith be restricted to "cultural loci"? Why should it continue to ignore the popular resistance that constitutes the response of the weak to forces of oppression" (1994:151). Bujo concurs as follows,

> In fact, it is true that a purely culturally centred theology is neither Christian nor African, nor simply human, it is no less true that a theology unilaterally based on social and economic issues without a cultural background goes very much against the dignity of the human person (2003:181).

The inclusion of the wider social context in the analysis of oppression and strategies for liberation finds resonance with liberation theologies outside of Africa. In Latin America the father of Liberation theology, Gustavo Guitterez identifies the oppressed 'non' persons as the interlocutors of theology: "the 'non persons', those who are not recognised as people by the existing social order; the poor, the exploited, those systematically and

legally deprived of their status as human beings" (1999:28). Similarly women theologians from different parts of the world concur with *The Circle* in their demand to include women's experiences of oppression in liberation theologies. Elina Vuala, accuses liberation theologians of ideological slipping" which "left out sexist and machista elements in society, church and theology" (2002:145).

However, it is Mveng's analysis of poverty that incorporates while transcending cultural, political and economic factors to describe a poverty of being which he describes as the "indigence of being" derived from centuries of slavery and colonization: "this is a kind of poverty which no longer concerns only exterior or interior goods or possessions but strikes at the very being, essence, and dignity of the human person" (1994:156). A deeper liberation is needed that encapsulates the spheres of poverty within the defining parameters of what it means to be human. It is precisely in response to this challenge that the integration of inculturation and liberation needs to locate itself. As mentioned in the introduction, this article proposes a critical integration of *ubuntu* and Trinitarian theology. The next section with develop this argument beginning with definitions of these terms.

3. Definitions: *Ubuntu* and the Trinity

In the introduction, an observation made that both *ubuntu* and Trinity were central symbols in their traditions where they define what it means to be human and therefore provide significant resources for liberating theological anthropologies in the African context that can respond to the challenges raised in the previous section, the most profound being the poverty of being. The discussions will begin with a definition of these two symbols.

3.1. Ubuntu

One of the unique characteristics of *ubuntu* is that its myriad of definitions does not interfere with its fundamentals that are held by both popular grassroot imagination and academic discourse. The following definition by Bogmba gives a summary of some of these agreed upon concepts of *ubuntu*:

> The concept 'ubuntu' means 'humanity' or 'humanness'. These concepts are important because people share a common humanity. As a philosophy, it upholds individuality and community together. It also promotes the exercise of individual responsibility for the good of the person and the rest of the members of the community. Central to the concept is the idea that relations and transactions that take place among people should be undertaken humanely, in light of values that people share in a given community (2004:298).

The defining characteristics of *ubuntu* such as interdependence of individual and community, shared values and the common good define being human as relational, ethical and social that is in relationship with others in community, living according to shared values for the common good and the good of the individual. There is implied equality as all share in a common humanity. As mentioned in the introduction, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* which means a person is a person through others summarizes *ubuntu* anthropology. Bujo compares the relational aspect of personhood in African traditions with those of the west in the following quotation,

> The human being does not become human by *cogito (*thinking) but by *relatio* (relationship) and *cognatio* (kinship) The fundamental principle of this ethics is not *cogito ergo sum* (think, so I am), but rather *cognatus sum ergo sum* (I am related, so I am) (1997:54).

Relatedness incorporates a range of values such as solidarity, love, hospitality, compassion and generosity. However as cautioned by women and liberation theologians in the previous section cultural constructs including *ubuntu* need to be interrogated so that their application does not sustain the status quo, silence dissent and legitimize oppression of women and the poor. The non-use of *ubuntu* in response to certain violations of persons for example the rape of lesbians, attacks on immigrants and incidents of racism speaks louder than its use because it betrays an unspoken fear that *ubuntu* will 'let in' those that communities want to exclude. To treat these groups with human dignity as required by *ubuntu* is experienced as a violation to the community. Thus there is a 'love hate' relationships with *ubuntu* that is driven by fear of 'threats' to community cohesion posed by these 'unwanted groups'. The wider social, economic and political context is critical in understanding how communities navigate between the use

and non-use of *ubuntu.* These observations illustrate the precarious status of *ubuntu* which can at times be an 'ingroup' rather than a universal ethos that translates to justice and liberation for all. Some men fear that the practice of *ubuntu* towards women will rob them of their masculinity defined as power over women; while some women may fear that *ubuntu* towards men signals acceptance of inequality subordination; communities may feel threatened that *ubuntu* towards foreigners will mean less resources for them and the list goes on and on. Violence becomes a way of keeping *ubuntu* out and everyone suffers. At the heart of these *ubuntu*-excluding behaviours is group preservation and fear of difference. In this context of fear community is defined as 'sameness' and difference a threat to the welfare of the community. In response the next section will critically explore the symbol of the Trinity as a theological resource for alternative and liberating anthropologies where difference, sameness, equality, relatedness, oneness and communion define what it means to be human.

3.2. The Trinity and Trinitarian Theology

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the reasons for the choice of the Trinity is that it is the symbol for the Christian God and the basis of Christian understanding of what it means to be human and made in the image of God, *imago dei*. Although the word "Trinity" is not found in Scripture, it represents the Christian belief of one God in three persons that is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God yet are different persons. Each Person is unique and distinct from the other based on their relationship of origin: the Father is distinct from the Spirit and Son because He is not begotten; the Son is distinct from the Father and the Spirit because He is begotten by the Father and the Spirit is distinct from the Son and the Father because He proceeds from both the Father and the Son (Evans 1999:29). They are equal because they share in the one divine nature. Their oneness and distinction co-exist as "the unique unity (and communion) between the divine persons goes hand in hand with the unique distinction" (O'Collins 1999b:9). Thus relationality, interdependence, equality, oneness and communion are defining ontological characteristics of the Trinity. Through these characteristics, God embodies the highest ideals of *ubuntu*. Further this inner life of the Trinity also referred to as the 'immanent Trinity' is revealed in salvation history primarily through the person, life, death and

resurrection of Jesus. According to Karl Rahner there is no gap between who God is (immanent Trinity) and what God does in salvation history (economic Trinity):"the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity" (1986:21). Some scholars like challenge this assertion by Rahner because they feel that it reduces God to salvation history. While acknowledging the validity of these arguments, for this paper, the issue is that it reveals God's nature as just actions for the liberation of the other in this case humanity. Therefore *imago dei* includes acting in liberating ways for justice particularly on behalf of the 'other' who is in the 'out group' different, oppressed and marginalized.

The search for practical justice and liberation application of the doctrine of the Trinity is a central characteristic of much of contemporary Trinitarian theological scholarship. O'Collins describes the search as *fides quaerens iustitiam socialem* that is faith seeking social justice. In respect to Trinitarian theology, the questions are as follows,

> What does trinitarian faith lead Christ's followers to do or leave undone in the world? Does it bring something special, even unique, to the struggle for promoting the common good and relieving the massive injustice of human society? (1999a:3).

In response, a rare consensus emerged among scholars of different traditions in favour of Social Models of the Trinity (SMT). The emphasis on 'social' as relational personhood is a defining characteristic of the Social Model of the Trinity (Grenz 2001:4). This view of the Trinity as relational and communal affects theological anthropology. Human persons are defined as relational, social, interdependent and communitarian. In this relationality there is according to Parker "no subordination, monergism, injustice, supersession, exclusion or isolation" (1980:179). Further equality and absence of hierarchy makes the Trinity according to Leonardo Boff " a model of justice and equality in relationships in the context of oppression and desire for liberation" (1988**:**6).

For feminist theologians the dominant male language in the Trinity presents unique challenges because the masculization of God has been used to legitimize the subordination and marginalization of women. Applying the principle of analogy, LaCugna argues that "every statement we make about God must be negated; if we say that God is a father, we must acknowledge that God is unlike a father because God is

neither male nor female" (1991:181). She further states that the "propensity to literalize metaphors for God and to forget the dissimilarity in every analogy as being at the root of the idolatry of a male God" (1991:182). Johnson elaborates further by arguing that the problem is not "use of male metaphors for God but in the fact that these male terms are used exclusively, literally and patriarchally" (1992:33). An example of literal interpretation is the use of the maleness of Jesus as justification to exclude women from leadership positions in the Church: **"**the visible image of the invisible God, the human man Jesus is used to tie the knot between maleness and divinity" (:35). A liberating interpretation of the Trinity for women is found in the emphasis on relationality as described in the following quotation from Anne Carr,

> The mystery of God as Trinity, as final and perfect sociality, embodies those qualities of mutuality, reciprocity, cooperation, unity, peace in genuine diversity that are feminist ideals and goals derived from the inclusivity of the gospel message. The final symbol of the God as Trinity thus provides women with an image and concept of God that entails qualities that make God truly worthy of imitation, worthy of the call to radical discipleship that is inherent in Jesus' message (1990**:**156-7).

The qualities listed above also reflect the ideals of *ubuntu* and contribute to a fuller definition of *imago dei* based on the Trinity. To be human, made in the image of God is to embody these inner Trinitarian qualities as well as the 'outer' Trinitarian qualities of acting justly for the liberation of the other. These two are united in the Trinity and therefore can be said to constitute the fullness of the *imago dei* for humanity. The next section will bring together Trinitarian theology and *ubuntu* as representing the integration of inculturation and liberation in the search for new horizons in African theology.

4. ***Ubuntu* and Trinitarian Theology as integration of inculturation and liberation theologies**

The central thesis of this article as described in the introduction is to heed the call by the elders of African theologians as well as women and liberation theologies to combine inculturation with liberation so that all forms of oppression can be addressed and the gospel be truly liberating to all in the African context. The discussions on *ubuntu* and Trinitarian theology in the previous sections showed profound

connections that make it possible to fuse the two together without collapsing one into the other. One of the challenges that the practice of *ubuntu* brings as discussed earlier is that it seems to breakdown in the face of 'people of difference' who are perceived as a threat to the wellbeing of the 'ingroup'. This breakdown is not due to the deficiency of *ubuntu* but a perceived threat of loss that the practice of *ubuntu* will bring. Trinitarian theology therefore becomes an ally of *ubuntu* by strengthening the ideals of an inclusive *ubuntu* that embraces the 'feared other'. To be human based on the core beliefs of Trinitarian *imago dei* and *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* is to belong to all of humanity without negating one's specific ethnicity or group identity. In the context of gender it means to recognize the equality of the different other as the basis of unity not the threat. The same principle applies in inter-group relational dynamics. The radical contribution that the combination of *ubuntu* and Trinitarian theology brings is that it makes actions for the promotion of justice and liberation an ontological characteristic of human nature. *Ubuntu* makes Trinitarian theology at home in African religious worldviews and gives it potential to be a resource for new community driven liberations theologies.

5. Conclusion

The foregoing discussions on the integration of inculturation and liberation as illustrated in combining *ubuntu* and Trinitarian theology serves to illustrate the wisdom of the elders in African theology in advocating for this integration as a way forward in the search for new horizons. The threats to life continues to escalate and take different forms such as violence against women, abuse of children, high levels of substance abuse among men and rampant political corruption. Culture seems to be evoked in regressive ways particular in the face of change. The contestation of culture seems to serve very little purpose, yet culture cannot be ignored and its usefulness lies in values that affirm human dignity life *ubuntu.* The abuse of cultural practices does not justify abandoning these practices. Hence the call by the elders to integrate inculturation with liberation provides direction for African theology.

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