Theology Brewed *in an* African Pot

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The first who always existed and will never die,
The only one bull in the world,
The one who sees both the inside and
the outside,
The one we meet everywhere,
The one who is in all ages, everywhere and
at all times,
The one who turns things upside down,
The one who has power to destroy completely,
The one who makes the sun set,
The one who gave everything on this earth and
can take everything away,
Response: Guide us!

Axe that fears no thistle,
Hoe that fears no soil,
Ram of majestic sinews and majestic
carriage,
Hero who never flees before the enemy,
Big boundless hut,
Victor over death,
Response: Protect us!

Compiled from John Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion *(London: Heinemann, 1975); Robert E. Hood,* Must God Remain Greek? Afro Cultures and God-Talk *(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz,* Towards an African Narrative Theology *(Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), and other sources.*

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The Mad Preacher and the Three Persons in One God

Glory be to the Father, the Creator and Source,
to the Nursing Mother,
to Jesus, the Healer and Eldest Brother
And to the Unsurpassed Great Spirit. Amen.
East African Prayer, quoted in Joseph Healey,
Once Upon a Time in Africa: Stories of Wisdom and Joy (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2004), 128

The novel *Things Fall Apart*, by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, remains a great classic of African literature. As I mentioned in chapter 1, the central theme explored in this riveting story is the encounter between the African way of life, in its native beauty and earthy innocence, and missionary Christianity, with its disruptive intrusion and baggage of bewildering concepts and doctrines of religion. In one scene, a missionary struggles to explain what appears to his audience as a ludicrous notion of three persons in one God.

After the singing the interpreter spoke about the Son of God whose name was Jesu Kristi. Okonkwo, who only stayed in the hope that it might come to chasing the men out of the village or whipping them, now said:

"You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife then." The crowd agreed.

"I did not say He had a wife," said the interpreter, somewhat lamely.

"Your buttocks said he had a son," said the joker. "So he must have a wife and all of them must have buttocks."

The missionary ignored him and went on to talk about the Holy Trinity. At the end of it Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was mad. He shrugged his shoulders and went away to tap his afternoon palm-wine.

Who could blame Okonkwo for failing to comprehend this new and seemingly bizarre understanding of God as Holy Trinity? The Christian understanding, experience, and belief in God are Trinitarian. Christianity traditionally represents the nature of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. It is hard enough to explain it to Christians, let alone explaining it clearly to the people of Umuofia village. This Christian understanding is a unique notion, and quite unlike our African conceptions of God.

As a convert to Catholicism, one of the questions I had to answer during catechetical instruction was "How many persons are there in one God?" The response was as simple as a mathematical answer: "There are three persons in one God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit." "Are there three Gods?" continued the catechist. "No, there are three persons in *one* God." As long as I parroted the correct formula, I could be promoted to the rank of a full member of the Catholic Church. But what did I really understand? To explain this baffling theological equation the catechist complicated the situation further by resorting to arithmetical formulas that he would scribble on the chalkboard: God + God + God = God! Or 1 + 1 + 1 = 1. The end result? A young catechumen, like myself at the time, was left in a confused state. I conveniently shrugged off the problem, like Okonkwo, who preferred the pleasure of his afternoon palm-wine to the lame attempt by the missionary to explain the madness of the Triune God. After all, the Trinity is a mystery; why bother to understand it? Yet I knew the catechist was wrong in the way he tried to initiate us into the madness of the three persons in one God.

The doctrine of the Triune God is not an abstract numerical

puzzle. The question it should confront us with is not "How come 1 + 1 + 1 = 1?" Instead, we should ask: What does it tell us about God's relationship with us? How do we understand this relationship? Viewing the Trinity as a mathematical puzzle inadvertently leads to tri-theism. This approach fails to articulate the reality that God is one, that God is fullness, and that God is present to us. Our point of departure is to understand Trinity as a *symbol*, not a road map into the inner workings of the divinity.

A symbol points the way and allows us the possibility of expanding our horizon of thought; it does not pretend to contain everything that it attempts to represent. Like all symbols, Trinity points beyond itself to something larger and fuller than our imagination can comprehend. It does not block the way to understanding; rather, it opens the way to an experience of reality in a much deeper and personal way. In this case, the symbol of the Trinity points to the event and nature of our salvation. It reminds us that we are saved by God, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Letter to the Ephesians (1:3-14) summarizes this truth very eloquently. It begins by cataloging all the spiritual blessings from God since the creation of the world and how all of them find fulfillment in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and, finally, how everything is sealed and sanctified in the gift and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There is one movement that unfolds and washes over us simultaneously as creation in God, redemption in Christ, and sanctification by the Holy Spirit. It has everything to do with a living and saving relationship with the God of life, and little if anything to do with arithmetic.

Trinity is our unique way as Christians of speaking about God and what God has done and continues to do in our lives. God is revealed to us through and in Christ. Vatican Council II's document *Dei Verbum* tells us, "The most intimate truth thus revealed about God and human salvation shines forth for us in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of revelation" (no. 2). Trinity is not separate from our salvation in Christ. We know God as Father, Son, and Spirit only because Jesus came to save us in the power of the Spirit and show us the way to God (see John 14).

Obirin Meta, *a Many-Sided Character*

In Nigeria, the Yoruba people have a compound name for a special kind of woman: *Obirin meta*. *Obirin* means "woman," and *meta* means "three." When you put the two together, the name designates a woman who combines the strength, character, personality, and beauty of three women. *Obirin meta* is a woman with many sides, a many-sided character. She is a multifunctional woman of unmatched density and unbounded substance.

Anyone familiar with the daily struggles of life in Africa would have met such women at some point along the busy streets of Africa's bustling towns and cities or in the rugged paths of its hamlets and villages. I have met quite a few. I think of a mother who could balance a big pot of water or a basket of produce on her head, with a baby strapped to her back, trying to make it home on time to prepare dinner for the whole family, taking care of all the needs of the family, and being a mother to all. In the midst of all these tasks and chores she might even be carrying another baby in her womb. It takes a special kind of woman to do this—it takes *Obirin meta*.

I recall a unique sight on one of the busy streets of Lagos in Nigeria of a mother at the steering wheel of a car, struggling to negotiate the chaotic rush hour traffic with one hand and at the same time to breastfeed her baby firmly clasped to her bosom with the other hand. She cuts a striking image of *Obirin meta*.

Not long ago I saw a painting of a rather unusual scene in the dining room of a religious house of formation in Arusha, Tanzania. In the painting, christened *The Burden* by Ugandan Jesuit artist Kizito Busobozi, a pregnant woman is returning from the fields with bundles of produce and firewood piled high on her head, and a baby strapped to her back. In one hand she has a hoe, the instrument of her manual labor; the other hand is holding her load to prevent it from falling. The shocking part of the painting is the sight of a bearded man stooped in front of this heavily laden mother and suckling at her exposed right breast. We might say, "This can't be true! Grown men do not suckle." Yet, the artist's intention paints a very familiar reality in Africa: women take responsibility for the well-being of all members of the family, both young and old. Everybody depends on her strength, nurture, and hard labor—albeit sometimes to the point of exploitation—as the source and sustainer of life. This is a vivid image of *Obirin meta*.

Obirin meta does not simply describe someone from the outside, that is, by identifying material or physical traits and attributes. Beyond exterior qualities, it designates something deeper that forms the essence, substance, or core of the person, and how the many dimensions of her interior reality relate and interact to characterize her as a unique kind of woman. *Obirin meta* describes a woman who combines largeness of heart, strength of character, and depth of wisdom and insight.

Let us come back to the doctrine of the Triune God. This image of an African woman offers a unique way of understanding the reality called Trinity. How do we name God? How do we name God from the inside and from the outside? As I mentioned above, naming God is a contentious theological pastime with a long history. And one of the names we have settled for is Trinity, or three persons in the one God. But as soon as we name God in this way, we always run into difficulty, namely, how to understand the language and theology we have chosen for God. Sometimes, to avoid fighting over terminology and formulas, we settle for mystery; we say God is a mystery we cannot comprehend or understand. Oftentimes to settle for mystery is to settle for distance. Yet, our faith remains very clear about the desire of God to embrace us in the flesh and pitch tent in our midst (John 1:14).

The character called *Obirin meta* gives us a way to name and understand God without alienating ourselves from God or preferring to go and tap our afternoon palm-wine, like Okonkwo. Theologically, that is, talking about God, it would not be out of place to think of God using the symbol of *Obirin meta*. What would this kind of God look like? Not a majestic high God enrobed in terrifying inapproachable light. Rather, *Obirin meta* allows us to form the idea and open up to the experience of a God who combines many sides, many personalities, many realities, many relationships, and many qualities *at the same time and as the one and the same God*. Another way of putting it is to say that *Obirin meta* symbolizes the abundant and radical open-endedness of God in God's self and in our encounter of God.

The veil of mystery is lifted, and we are able to recognize the God who enters into our experiences and meets us where we are.

When I think of our African ways of naming God, this divine Trinitarian reality makes sense to me. Like *Obirin meta*, God is *unbreakable stone*, when we need God to be strong for us; the *eye that sees the four corners of the world*, when we are overwhelmed by the complexities of our existence; the *river that never ceases to flow*, when we need God to shower us with blessings; the *slender arm pregnant with kindness*, when we need God to be generous; the *deep pot*, when we need God's unfathomable wisdom to unravel the mysteries of life; the *great nursing mother*, when we need God's love like we have known that of a nursing mother. The list can go on. What we need to realize by naming God in this way is that the mystery blocking our imagination and understanding disappears. God comes closer to us in the reality of everyday living. There is no mystery here—only God who is all things to us, inside and outside, the radically open-ended One.

Our God, like the African *Obirin meta*, combines many sides. Christian revelation presents God as a hyphenated God, always showing us a surplus side in our attempt to understand and embrace the divine presence in our life. Our God is God-mother, -father, -son, -daughter, -brother, -sister, -friend, -lover, -consoler, -comforter, -creator, -redeemer, -sanctifier . . . *at the same time and as the one and the same God*. Trinity is the name we call God in our theological conversation, but many are the ways in which God meets us where we are, here and now, like *Obirin meta*. There is no mystery here.

The above Trinitarian symbol may not be complete or explain all the intricacies and complexities of God as Trinity. That is not the aim of appealing to this African maternal symbol. The underlying idea is that it is possible to gain an insight into the Trinitarian reality of God that is more refreshing than the missionary's awkward attempt, which Okonkwo easily dismissed as madness. Had the missionary told Okonkwo that God was like his mother, perhaps he would have considered putting off his afternoon quest for palm-wine in favor of understanding the closeness of God to him.

There is no limit to the symbols we might find and apply to the idea of the Trinity in Africa. One could think of the proverb that

says that the cooking pot sits on three stones. The flame emanating from the fireplace made of three stones is one; so are the pot and the ultimate aim. But the stones maintain their individual identity while participating in the common task of cooking. Does this suggest something about God as Trinity? What about the round hut or *tukul* that one finds in many parts of rural Africa? There is always one main post that holds the entire edifice in place. This main post is distinct from the roof and the main wall, both of which also support the structure of the hut. Together they form a home, a place of gathering, of comfort, and of rest. Does this image conjure up something Trinitarian in our minds?

We only have to look. In Africa we are surrounded by countless Trinitarian symbols; they tell us that God is "the one we meet everywhere," "who sees both the inside and the outside."

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. How would you explain belief in the Trinity to a sixteen-year-old who is considering converting to Christianity?
2. Read the stories of creation in the book of Genesis: what are some of the qualities and attributes of God that the author(s) try to emphasize?
3. Traditionally we refer to God as Father, Son, and Spirit: can you identify other ways of naming God or other symbols for God from your experience of daily living that capture the same idea of God as Trinity?

A Prayer of Intercession

Gentle breeze from the four corners of the earth,
Bear our prayer on your wings to the court of the most high God.

Blazing sun, do not scorch our petition.
Falling rain, do not drown our request.
Flashing lightning, do not strike down our plea.
Roaring thunder, do not scare our supplication. . . .

Beaming moon, illumine our prayer before our God.
Twinkling stars, show our prayer the way to the abode of God.
Gentle dew, water the path of our prayer to the dwelling of God, the most high.
Rustling wind, make our prayer pleasing to the ears of God.

Gentle breeze from the four corners of the earth,
Bear our prayer on your wings to the court of the most high God.

Inspired by John 3:8, and the African proverb, "If you want to speak to God, tell it to the wind."

Prayer for Light, Water, and Food

Introduction

Presider: O God, you are the creator and potter of the universe and our world; you raised the hills and the mountains to their lofty heights and dug the valleys to surround them; you set the great lights in the sky; you drew water from the bowels of the earth, and provided abundant food for all your creatures.

Presider: We pray for light.

Reader: The light of the risen Christ dispels the darkness of our world. Remove from our midst the