CHAPTER TWO
AFRICAN THEOLOGY AND THE HERITAGE OF WISDOM

2.1. African Theology

2.1.1. Characterising ‘African’ Theology

African theology has been used as an umbrella term for different theologies arising from the continent.1 It refers to Christian theologies, as distinct from the theology of African traditional religion (ATR) and the theology of African Islam, even though both Christian and Islamic theologies draw from the religious heritage of ATR.2 As a term, African theology has been used for theologies among the mainstream churches,3 but during recent decades use of the term has expanded to include also those theologies arising in the contexts of the African Independent Churches (AICs).4 African theology in general is also closely related to African churches which, since independence was attained, have been generating theologies amongst themselves.5 Therefore African theology in its broader sense means the theology of these churches; in its narrower sense, it refers to an academic discipline.6

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4 Maluleke (1997, 17) includes AICs also among the mainstream churches. For this reason he says that the “phase of ‘describing’, ‘othering’, and ‘apologizing’ on behalf of these forms of Christianity must come to an end” (Maluleke 1994, 62).
5 According to Maluleke (1997, 8) it has been always acknowledged, that African theology, “ought to be at the service of the church in Africa. In other words, its chief task is that of enabling the church to develop her own theologies.”
6 Nyamiti 1994, 63; Mbiti 1981, 84.
There is not, however, consensus among scholars as to the conceptual meaning of the term African theology. The contemporary discussion deals with the very question of what ‘African’ means beyond the usage of the word. African theologians have examined attitudes towards romanticising African culture and measuring the authenticity of African theologies either in terms of the quantity of cultural traditions distinct from Western theology\(^7\) or the ability to create an atmosphere of African experience.\(^8\)

Theologians and especially philosophers have consciously focused on the concept of ‘African’ in order to explain the term and to find the relevance for using such expressions as African theology, African philosophy or African literature in the pluralistic reality of such a huge continent.\(^9\) In the theological sphere discussions concern not only African theology, but also African Christianity: What is ‘African’, reflecting the experience of African people, both men and women, and how is the concept of African theology related to this experience?\(^10\)

Even though for African theologians the existence of distinctively African theology and African Christianity is no longer subject to question, as it was in previous generations,\(^11\) it remains necessary to explore the way in which the word ‘African’ modifies theology, establishing conceptual clarity and making it distinct from other theologies. This conceptual characterisation differs from the way ‘African’ is understood in the real life scenario.

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\(^7\) Nearly all of the first generation of African theologians was trained in Western universities and seminaries, along with most other African intellectuals. This has inevitably led to the use of Western categories in the development of African theology. See, e.g., the analysis of Nyamiti’s theological approach in Vähäkangas 1999. However, even if inculturation and decolonisation projects focus on an epistemological break with Western theology (Maluleke 1994, 62) the debate over criteria for ‘truly African’ theology has also included unhealthy traits of comparison (Maluleke 1997, 8). Philosopher Samuel Imbo (2002, 1) describes the paradox of being African and being accused of having a non-African mentality “in the eyes of cultural purists.”

\(^8\) This is the case especially in respect to the theology of the AICs: “The tendency to regard AICs as the most authentic if not the only authentic African churches has often created some unhealthy theological rivalry—notably between theologians rather than African Christians—wherein AIC praxis is supposed to be more African, more grassroots-based, more local, and more genuine than so-called written African theologies. I have found such distinctions and theological rivalries to be generally unreliable and artificial—at least in the South African context” (Maluleke 1997, 18).


\(^10\) Concerning the discussion in African theology, see, e.g., Mugambi 1989; Oduyoye 1995a; Maluleke 1997, 6–8; Vähäkangas 1999, 55–63.

\(^11\) Maluleke 1996b, 4. With respect to the relatively young discipline of African philosophy, according to Wiredu (1991, 87), “the issue is sometimes posed in a needlessly provocative form by asking whether there is anything like African philosophy.”