

# **We Create the Path by Walking: Evolving an African Narrative Theology**

By Joseph G. Healey

*We create the path by walking*<sup>1</sup> goes a well-known universal saying. The same can be said about the development of African narrative theology in its many forms. Africans are writing a narrative contextual theology of inculturation and liberation out of their own experiences and lives.

## **I. Two Concrete Examples of African Narrative Theology**

Using the theological method or process of “See,” Judge and “Act,” let us start with two concrete examples of African narrative theology from grassroots experience:

1. Listen to a true story of the Sukuma people in northwestern Tanzania called “The Parable of the Two Brothers” as collected by the Sukuma Research Committee in Bujora, Mwanza, Tanzania:

Two brothers wanted to go to a distant country to make their fortune. They asked their father for a blessing saying: "Father, we go on our way to make our fortune. Your blessing please." Their father agreed saying, "Go with my blessing, but on your way put marks on the trees lest you get lost." After they received the blessing the two brothers started on their safari. The older brother entered the forest and cut down some of the trees as he passed and made marks on other trees. He did this for his whole journey. The younger brother took another route. While on the way he arrived at the house of a certain person. He knocked on the door. He was invited in and made friends with the children of that family. The younger brother continued on his journey and made friends wherever he passed.

Finally, the two brothers returned home. On their arrival their father gave them a warm welcome saying, "How happy I am to see you back home again, my sons, especially since you have returned safely. Wonderful! Now I would like to see the marks that you have left on the trees." So the father went with his firstborn son. On the way the older brother showed his father all kinds of trees that he had cut down and others with the marks that he had put on. They traveled a long distance without eating on the trip. Finally, they returned home empty-handed. Then the father set out with his second born son. During the journey the younger son and his father were warmly received by different friends. They were treated as special guests at each place they visited. A goat was slaughtered to welcome them. They were very happy. They brought home many gifts including meat.

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<sup>1</sup> The Spanish is *caminante no hay camino* based on the words “make the road by walking it” of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1875 – 1939).

Then the father summoned his two sons and said: "Dear sons, I have seen the work that you have done. I will arrange a marriage for the one who has done the best." He turned to the firstborn son and said, "My son, I think you are foolish. You cannot take care of people. I told you to put marks on the trees wherever you passed. You have cut down many trees. What is the profit of all these trees?" Turning to the second son he said: "My son, you are clever. I am happy you have put such important marks wherever you have gone. Wherever we passed we received a very good welcome. This came from your good personal relationships with the people we visited." Then he said: "My dear children, now it is good for me to give my reward. I will arrange a big feast for my younger son. We will slaughter a cow for him. For my younger son has made good and lasting marks wherever he passed."<sup>2</sup>

From this Sukuma parable comes the Sukuma proverb: *To make marks on the trees*. The theme of the story and the proverb is "Good Personal and Family Relationships in Life." The meaning is that to build good relationships with people is a very important priority in our lives as the younger son did. Western people can learn a great deal from Africans on how to be present to other people and to relate to them in a life-giving and positive way. Africans are deeply aware of the presence and needs of other people in their lives. To pass by a person without greeting is totally un-African, but is considered a normal way of relating in the Western world. In Africa everything is done to maintain good personal and communal relationships, harmony and peace at all costs. Anger and confrontation are looked down on. Among the Kuria people in Kenya and Tanzania the greatest sin is to strike a parent. For African people one of the main purposes of existence is to bless and not to curse.

A related African interpretation of this Sukuma story is found in the "Elaboration" section of the book *Wasukuma Hutangaza Injili* (the English translation is *The Sukuma People Proclaim the Gospel*). Using the I *Corinthians* 13: 1-13 passage on "love," the commentary on this "Two Brothers" parable says: "The goal of life is love of neighbor and love of Almighty God. The sign that we have succeeded in this goal is that we count our riches in our neighbors and friends. It is these riches that we will carry to heaven when all other activities are for this earth only."

For a story of African origin this "Parable of the Two Brothers" has interesting parallels with "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" (*Luke* 15:11-32). There is a mutual illumination and mutual enrichment when African stories and biblical stories are used together. As the Uganda proverb says, *One hand washes the other*. It is not that the biblical parallels validate the Sukuma examples. Rather the Sukuma stories are meaningful and part of African Christian Narrative Theology in their own right.

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<sup>2</sup> Healey, Joseph, "Three Case Studies of African Christology among the Sukuma People in Tanzania," *Tangaza Journal of Theology and Mission*, 2011, no.1 (June, 2011), 10-12. African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website, accessed October 17, 2017, [http://www.afriprov.org/images/afriprov/books/Three\\_Case\\_Studies\\_of\\_African\\_Christology.pdf](http://www.afriprov.org/images/afriprov/books/Three_Case_Studies_of_African_Christology.pdf)

Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa states:

If we take inculturation/incarnation seriously, the biblical truth, the Christic reality, is already present in these stories by virtue of the values they contain in themselves. The task of the theologian, it seems to me, is to articulate these values, to bring them out as clearly as possible as salvific values, as the reality of divine revelation present differently.<sup>3</sup>

Some universal values taught in these two stories are forgiveness, love, reconciliation, inclusiveness, personal and family relationships and close bonds and joy within the family. Both these stories have three main characters: a father and two sons. At the end of each story the younger son gets the glory and the reward.

But the African story has several different twists. Both sons go on a long journey. Then the father himself accompanies them on their second trips. The younger son does not waste his life, but in fact cleverly builds up personal relationships. The theme of the African story is "Good Personal and Family Relationships in Life" that is central to the African worldview. The biblical story has its own twist that brings a unique depth. The theme of the biblical story is "Forgiveness" that is central to the Christian worldview. In fact, forgiving love is the heart of God's relationship with humankind and the heart of Jesus Christ's teaching right up to and including his death on the cross. The biblical story illuminates the African story by a dramatic reversal. The prodigal or bad son is restored to the family and rewarded with gifts. The wastrel is given a feast. The father says: "But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." (*Luke 15:32*).

An African interpretation of "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" offers an additional insight related to the African values of community and unity. Due to his wild and dissolute living, the younger son is outside the unity of his family circle. This creates separation and incompleteness. When the older son complains that he has not been rewarded for being faithful, he fails to understand his father's explanation that he is already part of the family community, that he is already on the "inside." "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (*Luke 15:31*). The love and compassion of the father is so great that he wants immediately to bring his marginalized younger son back inside the family circle. An Oromo (Ethiopia) and Kipsigis (Kenya) proverb says *No matter how skinny, the son always belongs to the father*. Here the core values of community and forgiveness come together.

An added African touch is found in the painting of this prodigal son story in the Life of Jesus Mafa" Series from northern Cameroon in West Africa. Against the background of traditional Mafa huts and hills, the whole family runs out to welcome the younger son when he returns. Both the father and the mother warmly embrace the almost naked boy. The emotion-filled mother expresses special joy and excitement. The son is welcomed back with "prodigal" love by both of his devoted parents. The family circle is complete again.

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<sup>3</sup> Laurenti Magesa in email message to the author dated October 30, 2010.

2. Listen to a true story of “Peacebuilding in Tegeti Parish, Kenya.”

In 2008 Kenyan layman and evangelist Simon Rurinjah, a member of our Eastern Africa Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Training Team, was invited to the new Parish of Tegeti (that had been divided from Longisa Parish) in Kericho Diocese, Kenya by Father Daniel, the Parish Priest, to be a mediator in a dispute between the Kalenjin and Kikuyu Ethnic Groups. This dispute involved the Kalenjin people burning the houses and stealing the cattle of the Kikuyu people during the January-February, 2008 post-election crisis in Kenya. The Kikuyu fled from the area and then later came back to their homesteads.

In April, 2008 with the elders (both men and women) present, there was a week of mediation on the parish and outstation levels of the families of the two ethnic groups concerned that had intermarried over the years. On the last day seven Small Christian Communities (SCCs) gathered to participate in a forgiveness and reconciliation ceremony. Prayers were said by each ethnic group. As part of the compensation and restorative justice, the Kalenjins rebuilt the houses and returned the cattle of the Kikuyu as a fine for their original wrongdoing.

Then nine months later in 2009 there was a special Reconciliation Mass with prayers in both the Kalenjin and Gikuyu languages. Everyone in the SCCs participated in a communal meal of reconciliation with both Kalenjin and Kikuyu food served and eaten by the whole community. Everyone agreed that this violence and wrongdoing should never happen again. Until today (October, 2017) the peace continues and the local people are forgetting the past disputes.<sup>4</sup>

Many threads weave together in this African narrative theology of forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. African Storytelling plays an important part in sharing the painful experience of tribalism (negative ethnicity), violence, war and broken relationships. SCC members share their painful stories. This storytelling can lead to a healing of memories, forgiveness and reconciliation.

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Healey, “We Create the Path by Walking: Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Involvement in Peacebuilding in Eastern Africa.” *The Journal of Social Encounters (JSE)*, August, 2017, College of St. Benedict (CSB)/St. John's University (SJU) Digital Commons, Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website, accessed October 17, 2017,

[http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/path\\_walking.pdf](http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/path_walking.pdf)

Joseph Healey, “Seven SCCs Participate in a Forgiveness and Reconciliation Ceremony in Kenya,” SCCs Story No. 6 in the “SCCs Stories Database.” Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website, 2012, accessed October 17, 2017,

[http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/sccs-stories.html?task=display2&cid\[0\]=630](http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/sccs-stories.html?task=display2&cid[0]=630)

Stories are not just anecdotal. African Storytelling is a way of living, a way of listening, a way of being theologian. Thus, real storytelling is storylistening. Creative listening is deeper than just hearing. It is listening on a more fundamental level. It internalizes our experience. We participate in a theology of listening.

This involves a critical analysis of our society and the Catholic Church. The creative African solution in this tribal clash between these Kalenjin and Gikuyu people was restorative justice rather than retributive (punitive) justice. The Second African Synod Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortative *Africa's Commitment* in Number 83 under "The Good Governance of States" states that "pastoral workers have the task of studying and recommending restorative justice as a means and a process for promoting reconciliation, justice and peace, and the return of victims and offenders to the community." When disputes and conflicts arise, SCC members use a *palaver* style of conversation, discussion and dialog to resolve the problems. It involves establishing right relationships and the healing of all parties. Sometimes this process uses symbols and signs of African culture as well as songs, role plays and skits.

A clear challenge to Africa is found in the famous quotation from No. 6 of *Justice in the World*, the final document of the 1971 World Synod of Bishops: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."

An example of responding to the signs of the times: In January, 2013 I began teaching a ten-week seminar on "Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa Today" at Hekima University College in Nairobi. The aim was to examine how Small Christian Communities (SCCs) are a New Model of Church and a New Way of Being Church in promoting justice, reconciliation and peace in Africa today. The class discussions were a type of African Palaver Theology. One of our most interesting discussions was on the best order of words in the reconciliation and peacemaking process. We discovered that the word order used in the process of peacemaking/peacebuilding is very important, yet varies. The theme of the 2009 Second African Synod was "Reconciliation, Justice and Peace." The theme of the 2008 AMECEA<sup>5</sup> Plenary Assembly was "Reconciliation through Justice and Peace." The theme of the 2009 Kenya Lenten Campaign was "Justice, Reconciliation and Peace." The word order depends on the specific context and circumstances and the local interpretation.

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<sup>5</sup> AMECEA is an acronym for "Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa." It is a service organization for the National Episcopal Conferences of the nine English-speaking countries of Eastern Africa, namely Eritrea (1993), Ethiopia (1979), Kenya (1961), Malawi (1961), South Sudan (2011), Sudan (1973), Tanzania (1961), Uganda (1961) and Zambia (1961). The Republic of South Sudan became independent on 9 July, 2011, but the two Sudans remain part of one Episcopal Conference. Somalia (1995) and Djibouti (2002) are Affiliate Members. AMECEA is one of the eight Regional Episcopal Conferences of SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar).

In general, we seminar participants felt that this is an ongoing process in which real justice comes first. Then this leads to genuine reconciliation and finally to a more lasting peace. This is reflected in name of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission in Kenya. We agreed that after any kind of violence in the “Justice Stage” the wrongdoer/offender/ perpetrator has to admit his or her mistake and make some kind of compensation/amends where appropriate. This is part of restorative justice where stolen cattle have to be returned, a burned house repaired, etc. The person wronged/the victim has to genuinely forgive the wrongdoer while a slow process of dialog, healing and reconciliation takes place. This is solemnized by some kind of official ritual/ceremony and the use of local African symbols. All this can lead to a lasting peace. How SCCs participate in this process is found in the story of Tegeti Parish described earlier.

## **II. Searching for a Genuine, Authentic African Method of Theology**

For many years African theologians have searched for a genuine, authentic African method of theology. At the Padua Conference on Theological Ethics in Padua, Italy in July, 2006 the Ugandan theologian and historian John Waliggo emphasized the importance of African narrative theology and said:

Africans can now stimulate theological development. We refuse to leave our cultures and traditions behind. We have much to say about inculturation, offering new models for theological reflection. Our theological style is very concerned with narrative, expressing teachings in story. Our people listen better when you give them a story. This means using local expressions and rituals, linking the Gospel to their story.<sup>6</sup>

Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole emphasizes that African theologians listen to the real-life stories of the African people. It includes oral theological conversation. Importantly, storytelling honors women’s stories and experiences. Stories give texture to theology. They illustrate the lives of people living the theology, preventing theology from being just a series of propositions. Africans are writing a narrative contextual theology of inculturation and liberation out of their own experiences and lives. Thus, the African Church is enriching the World Church.

Another dimension of African Narrative Theology as part of African Christian Theology can be found in Magesa’s essay, “Endless Quest: The Vocation of an African Christian Theologian,” in a book by the same name. His personal theological journey in Africa and the stories connected with it could be described as autobiographical narrative theology. He places his and other theologians’ experience in an African context:

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<sup>6</sup> John Waliggo quoted in Joseph Healey, “African Conversational Theology: A New Way of Doing Theology,” Talk during the “Africa Matters Book Discussion: The Church We Want,” at the Center for African Studies, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, September 22, 2016, 2.

Jesus' practical oneness with humanity, his solidarity with the everyday life of the people "in the village," as Efoe Julien Penoukou put it, is the point. Here Jesus is seen as one with the people: he walks with them, knows every one of them, and is concerned about their successes and failures. As an Ancestor, he can be reached when people need him. Many of the relational qualities of this Jesus of the village, the Elder Brother and Proto-Ancestor of humanity, were incarnated by theologians, albeit imperfectly, by persons who embodied the spirit of human solidarity from different parts of the world. So African Theology became also narrative, bio- or auto-biographical theology.<sup>7</sup>

In explaining the theological method and process of the *Practicing Reconciliation, Doing Justice, Building Peace: Conversations in Catholic Theological Ethics in Africa* seminar and book, Nigerian theologian Emmanuel Orobator, SJ states:

Reconciliation, justice, and peace concern concrete situations that affect the continent... Instead of simply enunciating principles and creating scenarios, theological ethics has a narrative task: to give voice to the stories of victims and articulate in uncompromising terms the gospel virtues and the principles of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) that offer hope of redress and healing.<sup>8</sup>

Orobator also points out that a useful lesson on the nature and method of theological reflection in Africa emphasizes the necessity of taking experience (an inductive starting point) and context seriously. This means

repositioning theological reflection within the context of community called church and the wider society. Consequently, it becomes clear that it is not enough to theologize exclusively on the basis of the intellectual acumen of the theologian, while he or she comfortably ensconces himself or herself in the protected milieu of academia. "The work of theologizing," or, according to Tutu, the "exhilarating business" of theological reflection, must spring from the forthright observation and experience of the situation in the life of the believing community wherein echoes the strong but gentle wind of the Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Laurenti Magesa, "Endless Quest: The Vocation of an African Christian Theologian," Jesse Mugambi, and Evaristi Magoti (eds.), *Endless Quest: The Vocation of an African Christian Theologian. Essays in Honor of Laurenti Magesa*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2014, 18-19.

<sup>8</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (ed.), *Practicing Reconciliation, Doing Justice, Building Peace: Conversations on Catholic Theological Ethics in Africa*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2013, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, "The Sky is Wide Enough: A Historical-Critical Appraisal of Theological Activity and Method in Africa," *Hekima Review*, 40 (May, 2009), 41.

Nigerian theologian Afe Adogame points out that an important element of “doing theology” in Africa today is a dialog that is not confined to the seminary or the academy. African churches offer spaces of dialog that are empowering in themselves:

They engage in theological reflection with grassroots men, women and even children in *Bible* study groups, house-cell fellowships,<sup>10</sup> seminars and workshops. Thus African churches, through their numerous programs based on the specific socio-cultural and political contexts in which they operate, are developing, writing and accessing a theology of their own.<sup>11</sup>

This shift away from the theology of the Academy, of the Library, of the Ivory Tower, and “Laboratory Theology” to African contextual theology on the grassroots and to lay people involved in local theologies is significant. The emphasis is on praxis not principles.

American theologian Robert Schreiter, CPPS points out that local theologies can be constructed with the local community as theologian:

The experience of those in the Small Christian Communities who have seen the insight and power arising from the reflections of the people upon their experience and the Scriptures has prompted making the community itself the prime author of theology in local contexts. The Holy Spirit, working in and through the believing community, give shape and expression to Christian experience. Some of these communities have taught us to read the Scriptures in a fresh way and have called the larger church back to a fidelity to the prophetic Word of God.<sup>12</sup>

South African Bishop Kevin Dowling, CSSR of Rustenburg Diocese describes contextual theology in South Africa as “doing theology at the coal face,” that is, the dialog on grassroots issues with people on the local level such as coal miners and day laborers. This means listening to victims of systemic violence and reflecting on the structural causes of poverty, war and violence.<sup>13</sup>

Doing participatory theology with local people on the ground such as SCC members can lead to practical, pastoral solutions. Waliggo calls this “contextual theologies from below.”

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<sup>10</sup> The Anglican (Episcopalian) name for SCCs.

<sup>11</sup> Afe Adogame in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*. Edited by Diane Stinton (London: SPCK International Study Guide 46, 2010, 170.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985, 16.

<sup>13</sup> See Ellen Teague, “Bishop Kevin Dowling: How Do I Tell the Poor that God Loves Them?” Independent Catholic News (ICN) Website, 29 June, 2014, accessed on September 27, 2014, <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=25048>



Malawian theologian Patrick Kalilombe, MAfr call this “doing theology at the grassroots.”<sup>14</sup> It involves ordinary people who are not professional or specialist theologians. Members of the believing community actively engage in reflecting on their faith in the context of their everyday life. Following the “See,” “Judge” and “Act” methodology, people use social analysis and the light of the Gospel to transform society. They take responsibility in making their faith bear fruit on the challenges of their personal life and their mission in society. The less formally educated reflect upon and give relevant shape to their faith commitment and then search for appropriate ways of putting it into practice. In this communitarian theology they question the *status quo* and work to change it.

Nigerian Scripture Scholar Teresa Okure, SHCJ emphasizes the importance of African women theologians’ dialog with people on the grassroots. When someone described Teresa’s own method or process of reading the *Bible* with people who were not *Bible* experts (especially circles of African laywomen who connect the *Bible* to daily life) as “marketplace hermeneutics,”<sup>15</sup> she considered it the “highest compliment” because this was the very method that Jesus used.

An interesting Case Study of how an African theologian has helped to develop the narrative theology of SCCs is described as follows:

In June, 2011 I lived at Michael Kirwen, MM’s house near Langata, Nairobi, Kenya while participating in an AMECEA Meeting at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA). Another house guest was Father Laurenti Mageza who was teaching in the Maryknoll Institute of African Studies (MIAS) at the Tangaza University College. At the time I was writing the book that eventually became *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press Double *Spearhead* Nos. 199-200 (2012). The Digital Version updated as of October 17, 2016 is 976 pages and is available as a free Ebook on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website at: [http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build\\_new.pdf](http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf)

I would write drafts of the theological sections of this book in the early morning and then discuss them with Laurenti in the late afternoon. It was a stimulating and enriching experience of theological conversation and dialog – what we now frequently call African Palaver Theology. Laurenti explained that the starting point is the grassroots experiences themselves. Then the theologian reflects on them and articulates them in a more systematic theological way. Laurenti suggested a process in which I would describe specific Small Christian Communities (SCCs) activities, events and case studies – a kind of summary of

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<sup>14</sup> This theological method is described at length in Patrick Kalilombe, *Doing Theology at the Grassroots: Theological Essays from Malawi*, Gweru: Mambo Press, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Also called “local community hermeneutics.”

SCCs praxis on the grassroots, local level. Afterwards he would theologize on these experiences. We discussed both the theological implications and the practical applications. We were really using the steps in the Pastoral Spiral (better known as the Pastoral Circle). Then I would enter the fruit of our conversations in the updated draft of my book the next day.

To take a specific example, we discussed the growth of the justice and peace outreach of SCCs in Eastern Africa in the last 10 years. SCCs have been actively involved in reconciliation in Kenya after the 2008 post-election violence both within individual SCCs and as part of wider reconciliation services and ceremonies especially due to the annual Kenyan Lenten Campaign. The use of the "See," "Judge" and "Act" Process/Methodology of the Pastoral Spiral made a significant difference in helping to analyze the local situation and to decide on practical solutions. Magesa theologized on these new justice and peace outreaches of SCCs in Kenya. For example, he took the true story "Peacebuilding in Tegeti Parish, Kenya" that used a *palaver* style of conversation, discussion and dialog to resolve local problems to develop elements of an African Theology of Reconciliation and Peace.<sup>16</sup>

Evolving an African method of narrative theology is closely connected to pastoral ministry and the challenge of Pope Francis in No. 33 of *The Joy of the Gospel*:

Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: "We have always done it this way." I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory. I encourage everyone to apply the guidelines found in this document generously and courageously, without inhibitions or fear. The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment.

We tell the story of solidarity and accompaniment in our journey together.

### **III. African Narrative Theology of Inculturation**

One type of inculturation theology is an African narrative theology of inculturation. The starting part is African culture, but specifically African oral literature and the wide range of narrative and oral forms: proverbs, sayings, riddles, stories, myths, plays, and songs explained in their historical and cultural contexts. These oral forms especially proverbs and sayings are a very natural and very popular form of African *palaver*, conversation and speech. There is a famous Igbo, Nigeria saying *Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten*. They are a way of life for Africans especially on the local level.

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph Healey, "The Future of Small Christian Communities in Africa," *Endless Quest*, 109.

Kenyan theologian Anne Nasimiyu, LSOSF states: "The oral literature of the African people is their unwritten *Bible*. This religious wisdom is found in African idioms, wise sayings, legends, myths, stories, proverbs and oral history."<sup>17</sup> Kenyan Anglican theologian John Mbiti adds: "Proverbs are a rich source of African Religion and philosophy. They contain and point to a deep spirituality, as well as theological and philosophical insights. In this case they form a bridge between traditional African religiosity and biblical teaching."<sup>18</sup>

American theologian and storyteller John Shea and others<sup>19</sup> have popularized Story Theology, but Narrative Theology is broader and more inclusive of all narrative forms.<sup>20</sup> This is a relatively new type of African theology. Ghanaian Anglican theologian John Pobee states:

The urgent task is the collection of myths, proverbs, invocations, prayers, incantations, ritual, songs, dreams and so on. The collections made so far are rather haphazard and are part of sociological and anthropological studies. We are asking for the specific theological mind to be brought to bear on the vast materials of the sources of African Traditional Religion.<sup>21</sup>

Another important type of African contextual theology is oral theology. Mbiti points out:

African oral theology is a living reality. We must come to terms with it. We must acknowledge its role in the total life of the church. It is the most articulate expression of theological creativity in Africa. This form of theology gives the church a certain measure of theological selfhood and independence... Oral theology is produced in the fields, by the masses, through song, sermon, teaching, prayer, conversation, etc. It is theology in the open air, often unrecorded, often heard only by small groups of audience, and generally lost as

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<sup>17</sup> Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Feminism and African Theology," *African Christian Studies*, 9, 2 (June, 1993), 22.

<sup>18</sup> John Mbiti, "Children Confer Glory On a Home," *Draft Introduction to African Proverbs Series*, Burgdorf: Unpublished Paper, 1993, 2.

<sup>19</sup> See John Shea, *Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1978) and *Stories of Faith* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1980). See also books by John Aurelio, William Bausch, Frederick Buechner, John Dominic Crossan, Anthony de Mello, Joseph Donders, John Dunne, John Navone, Basil Pennington, Terrence Tilley and Elie Wiesel.

<sup>20</sup> Narrative forms of theology are also found in the novels, short stories, plays and poetry of African writers. It is significant that the novels and plays of the Nigerian writers Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka contain many African proverbs and sayings.

<sup>21</sup> John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1979, 21.

far as libraries and seminaries are concerned. Symbolic theology is expressed through art, sculpture, drama, symbols, rituals, dance, colors, numbers, etc.<sup>22</sup>

Mbiti also reminds us that art is a significant part of theology. In fact, it is called visual theology or symbolic theology. The Jesus Mafa paintings mentioned above are genuine theology.

Various books and booklets of African stories, myths, parables, proverbs, sayings, riddles and other types of African oral literature, the art and symbols, and grassroots oral experiences are part of the rich cultural history and contemporary praxis of the people of Africa. Through African stories, proverbs and art the African Church is enriching the World Church.

In 1998 we started the African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website (<http://www.afriprov.org>)

The "Welcome Message" states:

With the marvels of the new information technology we can use this internet website to:

1. Share our own work (collections, research, writings, applications, experiences) and enthusiasm for "African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories" with other people with similar interests. Two main focuses are Endangered African Proverbs Collections and African Proverbs and Stories Legacy Projects.
2. Ask questions of, and obtain materials from, other people with similar interests.
3. Compile an ongoing collection of a wide variety of resources (in the form of an Annotated Bibliography, Book Reviews, and News Archives) related to "African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories."
4. Support and encourage different people involved in this wonderful world of "African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories."
5. Develop and expand a worldwide network of people interested in "African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories".
6. Publish articles and books on African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories.

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<sup>22</sup> John Mbiti, "Cattle Are Born with Ears, Their Horns Grow Later: Towards an Appreciation of African Oral Theology" in *All African Lutheran Consultation on Christian Theology and Christian Education for the African Context*. Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1978, 49-50.

7. Use African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories as the source of writing articles and books on African Narrative Theology.<sup>23 24</sup>

The website has 228 "African Proverbs and Sayings of the Month" in 136 different African Languages from 48 African countries by 203 different contributors.

The "African Stories Database" (<http://www.afriprov.org/resources/storiesdatabase.html>) contains 586 African Stories in a searchable, user-friendly collection including folktales, historical fiction pieces, myths, parables, poems, prayers, riddles, song-proverbs and true stories. This search feature enables users to find African stories for a wide variety of interests and occasions. The content of this database is made of up stories containing over 140 different themes and sub-themes.

The African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Facebook Page (<https://www.facebook.com/afriprov>) is much more than just casual and superficial social

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<sup>23</sup> Examples under "Bibliography" under "Resources" accessed on October 15, 2017 are:

1. "Three Case Studies of African Christology Among the Sukuma People in Tanzania" by Joseph G. Healey, MM  
[http://www.afriprov.org/images/afriprov/books/Three\\_Case\\_Studies\\_of\\_African\\_Christology.pdf](http://www.afriprov.org/images/afriprov/books/Three_Case_Studies_of_African_Christology.pdf)
2. "The Sukuma Sacrificial Goat and Christianity: A Basis for Inculturation in Africa" by Joseph M. Lupande, Joseph G. Healey, MM and Donald F. Sybertz, MM  
<http://www.afriprov.org/images/stories/sukuma.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Donald Sybertz, Joseph Healey and the Ndoleleji Research Committee in Shinyanga Diocese in Shinyanga, Tanzania continue to write a lengthy theological interpretation of the creation myth *Tears of Joy: African Story about Heroes and Monsters*, the Sukuma myth of the young man Masala Kulangwa and the monster Shing'weng'we that is part of a long Sukuma song. Presently they are comparing Masala Kulangwa and Jesus Christ and the Mother of Masala Kulangwa and the Mother of Jesus Christ. So far different versions of the myth have been published as follows:

Sybertz, Donald. *Tears of Joy: African Story about Heroes and Monsters*. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Mathews Bookstore & Stationers, 2006. The Swahili version is *Machizi ya Furaha: Hadithi za Mashujaa na Majitu* and the Sukuma version is *Shisaji ja Buyegi: Jigano ja Lishing'weng'we* (Sukuma Legacy Website, accessed on October 15, 2107, <https://sukumalegacy.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/shisaji1.pdf>)

Tertrais, Max. *The Clever Young Man and the Monster: The Sukuma Myth of Shing'weng'we and Masala Kulangwa*. Paulines Publications Africa, 2000. The Swahili version is *Kijana Mwerevu na Shing'weng'we: Hadithi ya Kisukuma ya Shing'weng'we and Masala Kulangwa*. With accompanying eight-page booklet *The Clever Young Man and the Monster: Comments on the Book*.

networking. This page is a forum for conversation, discussion, exchange, sharing analysis and an important "space" ("place") for spiritual, pastoral and theological conversation, questions, discussion and sharing including:

1. Faith Sharing.
2. Discussion on the content (themes and topics) of articles, theses, booklets and books on African Theology.
3. African Christian Palaver Theology or African Christian Conversation Theology.
4. Discussion on the process or methodology of theology.

The Video Page of the African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website has a short eight-minute video on Donald Sybertz, MM and the Ndoleleji Research Committee in Shinyanga, Tanzania called "Opening a Door on African Theology and Music" (<http://www.afriprov.org/resources/videos.html>). This is grassroots contextual theology.

#### **IV. African Christian Conversation Theology**

There is a connection between African Christian *Palaver* Theology, African Christian Theology as Conversation and African Christian Narrative Theology. They are part of each other. They form a union.

African theologians are developing African Conversation Theology, or more specifically African Christian Conversation Theology, as a "New Way of Doing Theology." In Africa we prefer the term African *Palaver* Theology, but we realize that the word *palaver* carries a lot of negative baggage in the Western world. For us it is both the name of a method or process of theology and the name of a type of content of theology (much like Liberation Theology). Method heavily influences and determines content and vice versa. It is a two-way process that illuminates and enriches African values and Christian values. It is similar to Mango Tree Theology and Storytelling Theology.

Orobator describes this distinctive method or process very clearly in the preliminary papers for the theological colloquium and book *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*.

This is African Theology as Conversation,<sup>25</sup> Active Dialog, Intensive Listening and Learning from Each Other (described as "listening in

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<sup>25</sup> In the meetings and writings of theologians worldwide the idea of Catholic theology as "conversation" is becoming more and more common. A report of the annual conference of the Catholic Theological Association in Durham, England in September, 2013 states: "All the members seem to like the idea of Catholic theology as a 'conversation.'" Brendan Walsh, "Meet the Glums," *Tablet*, 21 (September, 2013), 15. We can ask: "Is the West finally learning from Africa?"

conversation”) and Consensus. This new way of doing African Christian Theology is participatory, collaborative, democratic, cross-disciplinary and multigenerational.<sup>26</sup>

Orobator adds:

Doing theology is not an isolated enterprise, particularly in Africa where doing theology is a community event. At Hekima University College in Nairobi where I teach, one of my favorite classes is called simply “*Palaver Session*.” This is the time when students sit in a round hut and talk about God, faith, and their religious experiences in an African context. Sometimes we have something to drink and munch on as we dialog, debate and converse.<sup>27</sup>

He expands this conversational theological methodology by saying:

Strong, dynamic currents are shaping the flow of theological discourse in Africa. A unique characteristic of this discourse is the widening circle of conversation partners. African theologians are no longer content with talking to like-minded theologians; they engage bishops, civil society groups and government representatives as conversational partners in a rational dialogue and critical analysis within society and in the [Catholic] Church. This conversational methodology breaks new ground in theological scholarship in Africa and represents a new way of doing theology in which collaboration and conversation win over confrontation and adversarial positions. The result is a process of mutual listening and learning, a vital ingredient for constructing what veteran African theologian Elochukwu Uzukwu designates “the listening church.”<sup>28</sup>

Nigerian theologian Elochukwu Uzukwu published his important Orbis book *A Listening Church, Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* in 1996. To use a play on words, perhaps Pope Francis “listened” to him when the pope emphasizes that the Catholic bishops and other leaders today must be a Listening Church first and a Teaching Church second.

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On a related note, when the book *Towards an African Narrative Theology* was first published, a Western reviewer said that “narrative theology” is a “slippery slope” because narrative and storytelling it does not fit into the pattern of conventional Western theology that is mainly propositional. Here again, African narrative theology can challenge Western thinking and concepts.

<sup>26</sup> See Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, “Preface: About a Research Project,” Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (ed.), *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016. Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2016, xi-xiii.

<sup>27</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, Maryknoll, New York, USA: Orbis Books, 2008, xi.

<sup>28</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, *Practicing Reconciliation*, 130-131.

Thus, the starting point of this kind of African Christian Theology is both context and experience. This theology draws on grassroots experiences and practical “on the ground” research. In the spirit of Pope Francis African theologians try to listen to the cries of the poor, the margined and those on the peripheries of society. This method draws on the ideas and writings of Bénézet Bujo,<sup>29</sup> Jean Marc Ela, Katongole, Okure, Uzukwu and others. Local, contextual theologies can be constructed in Africa with the local communities as “theologian.”

Orobator developed this distinctive method or process in convening the three international Theological Colloquia on Church, Religion and Society in Africa (in short, TCCRSA) from which the essays of the above book are taken. This “Three-year Theological Research Project in the Currents of the 50th Anniversary of Vatican II” took place in Nairobi in 2013, 2014 and 2015. These conversation-style theological research seminars used *palaver* sessions, *baraza* sessions and informal, interactive roundtables on African theology to provoke conversation, discussion and dialog. Over the three years there were 60 participants from very diverse backgrounds. The 20 writers in this present volume include 10 priests, five lay women, three religious sisters and two bishops. Significant is the contribution of the eight women.

I would like to illustrate this method by using my own essay called “Beyond Vatican II: Imagining the Catholic Church of Nairobi I.” Orobator first invited writers to draft papers on specific themes. I invited many African pastoral workers including members of grassroots Small Christian Communities and theologians such as Magesa into the “conversation” on my paper and incorporated their comments and insights. Then the papers were circulated to the colloquium participants to read and reflect on a head of time. Some gave feedback to the presenters. For example, one priest from South Africa gave me a very helpful and detailed written commentary on my paper with many practical suggestions.

At the colloquium itself I presented a summary of my paper in a plenary session. Here is the opening paragraph under the heading “Be Bold and Creative” taken from No. 33 of Pope Francis’ *The Joy of the Gospel*:

The editor of this volume, Orobator, Jim Keane, the Acquiring Editor of Orbis Books, and I met to discuss a book that could evolve out of TCCRSA. In brainstorming about a possible title and cover we tried to think outside the conventual box. We drew a line through the words “Vatican III, Rome” on the cover and wrote “Nairobi I.” We could have as easily written “Kinshasa I” or “Lagos I.” Going further afield we could have written “Manila I” or “Sao Paulo I.” The idea was to challenge the natural assumption that the next ecumenical council has to take place in Rome. If the center of gravity of the Catholic Church is moving from the West to the Global South, why not have the successor to Vatican II meet in one of the great cities of the Southern Hemisphere?<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Bénézet Bujo has written extensively on the meaning and richness of *palaver* and the power of the “word” in the African context. See *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Healey, Joseph, “Beyond Vatican II: Imagining the Catholic Church of Nairobi I,” *The Church We Want*, 189.



My co-presenter was Nontando Hadebe, a lay woman theologian from South Africa, that in itself shows the rich diversity of the participants. Afterwards, a half hour plenary session combined comments from the floor and questions and answers on our papers. Orobator, a man of many talents, simultaneously recorded this “conversation” on my paper in his computer and “miraculously” handed me a half page summary at the end of the session. During the coffee breaks and meals I dialogued further with participants on my paper. In the spirit and practice of this colloquium using the method or process of African Christian Conversation Theology, I incorporated the comments and insights of the participants in the final draft of my chapter for this book.

Following the title of this present essay – “We Create the Path by Walking: Evolving an African Narrative Theology” – my chapter in the book *The Church We Want* describes the journey and story of African Catholics. In the spirit of the pastoral challenges of Pope Francis, the final section of my chapter proposes pastoral solutions to the “Two Meanings of the Eucharistic Famine in Africa:”

1. Ordination of Married Community Elders or Locally Ordained Ministers (Married Priesthood).
2. African Stages of Marriage.

As we continue to walk together and to share our stories, let our conversation, discussion and discernment on these pastoral and theological challenges in Africa evolve and grow. In the spirit of the collaborative, collegial and synodal style of African Narrative Theology, let us follow the well-known African Proverb: *If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together.*

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[http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium\\_en.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.pdf)

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[http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build\\_new.pdf](http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf)

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Rev. Joseph G. Healey, MM  
Maryknoll Society  
P.O. Box 43058  
00100 Nairobi, Kenya  
0723-362-993 (Safaricom, Kenya)  
973-216-4997 (AT&T, USA)  
Email: [JGHealey@aol.com](mailto:JGHealey@aol.com)  
Skype: joseph-healey

### **Short Biography**

Father Joseph G. Healey, MM is an American Maryknoll missionary priest who lives in Nairobi, Kenya. He came to Kenya in 1968 and founded the Regional Catholic Bishops Association (AMECEA) Social Communications Office in Nairobi. Presently he teaches a full semester core course on "Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as a New Model of Church in Africa Today" at Tangaza University College (CUEA) in Nairobi and a similar Elective Course at Hekima University College (CUEA) in Nairobi. He co-authored *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Orbis Books and Paulines Publications Africa) and is the Moderator of the [African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website](http://www.afriprov.org) (www.afriprov.org).

### **12 words to consider for an Index (without the adjective African)**

Christian conversation theology  
conversation theology  
inculturation  
narrative  
narrative theology  
oral theology  
palaver  
palaver theology  
proverbs  
stories

storytelling  
theological method

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