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**AN OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN RESEARCH**

**Introduction**

The African Church has a compelling, creative and - sometimes - complex story to share with the worldwide church. African Christian research is a vital component in the telling of that story. The way in which that story is told is one of the most important components of African Christian research. One of the fundamental errors of researchers today is that they are telling the story of African Christianity “as if the Christian Church were in Africa, but not of Africa.”<sup>1</sup> This presentation posits that to be meaningful and empowering, African Christian research must, of necessity, include African thought and ideas from inception through completion to the implementation of recommendations arising from the research.

In presenting the overview of African Christian research I shall be drawing on my personal experience in research over the past few years. Secondly, I am aware of how highly culturally and religiously diverse Africa is and yet I am also aware of certain cosmological ideas that most Africans share. It is therefore possible to trace the broad outline of the African worldview and beliefs. As I will argue later on in this presentation, research that focuses on Africans and their Christianity cannot be remotely pursued in some academic ivory tower rather it requires genuinely personal participation and commitment. For this reason, all Africans and non-Africans who are engaged in African Christian research qualify to be called African Christian researchers. I want to argue that this effort does not become African Christian research just because it has been done by an African. Rather, African Christian research is African because it speaks of African problems from the African point of view. Its findings present an African understanding of the mystery of Christ's salvation as it applies to an African situation.

In relation to Christianity, African Christian research should be interested in some important questions such as, what does the remarkable growth of Christian churches in Africa and the corresponding

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1 Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, A History of the Church in Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

decline in membership among the mother churches mean to an African Christian researcher today? Are there certain things African Christian churches are doing differently in their ongoing task of proclaiming the gospel in Africa?

### **African church's scope in global context**

Gerrie Ter Haar and Stephen Ellis say that the resilience of religion in developing countries is one of the greatest surprises of recent decades.<sup>2</sup> As regards the church, Christianity's explosive growth in Africa is part of a startling reversal in world history. The majority of Christians in the world now live in the global South, with Africa being one of the fastest growing Christian continents in the world today. Christianity is no longer the religion of the West. Christianity has won the hearts and minds of a wide range of people to the extent that the Church in Africa can no longer be defined exclusively as belonging to the baptized persons. This is what Kwame Bediako calls, "the renewal of a non-western religion."<sup>3</sup> Some scholars have argued that very soon Africa will not only be one of the spiritual centers of Christianity, but Christians in the world will also begin to see themselves as part to the story of African Christianity.

In recent years, it has been debated by scholars such as Philip Jenkins, Robert Wuthnow and Mark A. Noll<sup>4</sup> as to whether the influence of Christians in the "Global North" is waning, or not. Wherever Christianity has effectively expanded in Africa, it has become increasingly African by becoming rooted more authentically in local cultures. As Bengt Sundkler said, "the Church is no longer *in* Africa, but is now *of* Africa."<sup>5</sup>

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2 Gerrie Ter Haar and Stephen Ellis, "The Role of Religion in Development: Towards a New Relationship Between the European Union and Africa," in The European Journal of Development Research (2006): 351-352.

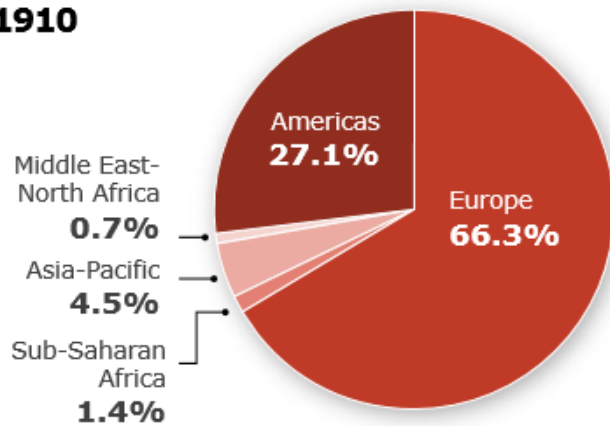
3 Kwame Bediako, Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-western Religion (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

4 Philip Jenkins, The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Robert Wuthnow, Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009); and Mark A. Noll, The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

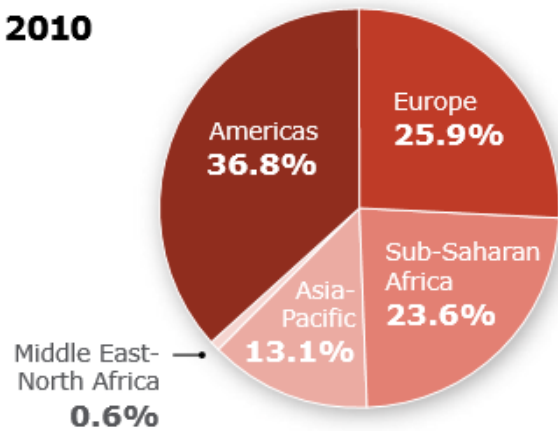
5 Sundkler and Steed, A History of the Church in Africa, 3.

## Regional Distribution of Christians

**1910**



**2010**



Figures for 1910 are from a Pew Forum analysis of data from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life • *Global Christianity*, December 2011

Traditionally, most of the creative religious thinking has been done in the leading intellectual centres in Europe and in North America and then imported to Africa. Today that situation is changing due to the process of contextualization. A good number of scholars are engaged in African Christian research. In this presentation, the term African Christian research simply means a research that is done from the perspectives of the African worldview and whose results reflect on the Gospel, the Christian tradition, and the total African reality. The African reality in the context of African Christian research includes the changing African society. Some scholars prefer to speak of African “Christianities” because they see much diversity in African contexts. Others see a fundamental similarity in the Christian religious experience and in the nature of the emerging issues.

### **Factors that favored the development of African Christian research before the 1950s**

There have been several factors that have favored the development of African Christian research namely (a) Political and human rights activists' movements. These were movements calling for the recognition of the human dignity and African cultural identity. Most of the pioneer scholars of these movements such as William E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), Edward W. Blyden (1832-1912), Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) and George Padmore (1902-1959) were African-Americans. African intellectuals founded nationalist movements and the most famous among them are: “Negritude” (in the Francophone Africa) and the “African Personality” (in the Anglophone Africa).

(b) Experience of pioneer African Pastors (clergymen). One of the church leaders who was convinced of the uniqueness of Christianity was Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1807-1891). According to Crowther, Christianity does not have to destroy the African character to make itself relevant to the people. James Johnson of Sierra Leone, (1836-1917) said that accepting Christianity does not mean making one lose his or her own identity. Johnson used to ask: “Why can’t there be African Christianity as there already exist, European or Asian Christianity?”

### **Major stages in the development of African Christian research**

Scholars have been making major contributions to African Christian research since the early centuries of Christianity in Africa. For instance, the Coptic tradition in Egypt and Ethiopia gave the Christian world its first schools of theological thought. Great theologians such as Athanasius, Cyril, Origen, Clement, were from the theological school of Alexandria in Egypt and their research findings have had great influence on the Church of the East, while Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine among others were from the theological school of Carthage in the Maghreb region of North Africa and their research findings have had great influence on the Church of the west.

Beginning from the early 1950s, inspiration towards developing African Christian research came from African students who were studying in Europe and North America. Some universities in Europe and North America began to accept academic research papers on themes bordering on African culture and worldview in relation to the Christian faith. From the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Africa church started seeing an abundant production of researched works by African Christian researchers that had been generated from an African perspective in a more systematic way.

Two main stages have been identified in the development of African Christian research in contemporary Africa. The early attempts came mostly from the Francophone and the Anglophone speaking countries of the African continent. The two language groups were eventually joined by the Africans in diaspora. The primary focus of their research was to articulate the African concept of the “ultimate reality” and its relation with humanity. This first stage in the development of African Christian research was inspired mostly by Placide Tempels' research on Bantu philosophy. The Bantu Philosophy that was published in 1945 in Lubumbashi and in 1946 in Antwerp was groundbreaking as it introduced a new discourse regarding the state and status of African thinking. During this time, the Western setting dominated the scene in which Tempels introduced Bantu Philosophy. Tempels criticized the universal claim of Western philosophy by presenting African thinking of wisdom as

rational, religious and philosophical.

Tempels achieved a small miracle at a time that philosophy used to be seen as a unique quality of the West. At the centre of the *Bantu Philosophy* is the concept of “vital force” that is universal and omnipotent. Some scholars have argued that without Tempels perhaps there would not have been African philosophy.

In 1956 a group of young African Christian academicians raised questions about how Christian research was being done in Africa and whether or not things could be different. They came up with the publication whose title was *Des Prêtres noirs s’interrogent* (Black Priests question themselves).

The first stage in the development of African Christian research was characterized by researchers seeking for African philosophical categories to articulate a systematic way of presenting the Gospel to the Africans. What was common among African Christian researchers at this time was the recognition of the fact that a blind acceptance of the knowledge of God, rather than a meaningful experience of God, presents a severe threat to the African Christian spirituality. Secondly, an African Christian does not “act” Christianity, rather he or she can only “be” Christian. Their interest was not in Christianizing Africans, but Africanizing Christianity. However, this first attempt has been criticized for its lack of scientific vigor.

While the first stage was dominated by the philosophical approach, the anthropological approach dominated the second attempts by the African Christian researchers to articulate in writing, the cultural and religious heritage of the Africans in the light of the Christian faith and their experience as a people. During the second stage, it was realized that (a) culture had a much deeper influence on the person than was previously thought. (b) Merely converting individuals and isolating them from their culture with the aim of protecting their Christian faith was a fruitless venture. (c) If authentic conversion was to take place, it had to be through a real penetration of the cultural environment itself with the Gospel values.

The new development in the appreciation of culture and its impact on an African, introduced a further challenge in missiological reflection. The question was “is it justifiable to transplant for the sake of uniformity, a Christianity developed in another cultural context, to all people and cultures around the world? How do we bring the African worldview into contact with the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ? The related question was can African research refrain from sticking to the pathways mapped

out by researchers from Europe and North America? In response to such questions, some of the African Christian researchers developed an approach that has come to be known as the Afrocentric method of doing research.<sup>6</sup>

Afrocentricity is a philosophical and theoretical paradigm whose origins are attributed to Molefi Asante's works that came out in the 1980s. His works "form the essential core of the idea that interpretation and explanation based on the role of Africans as subjects is most consistent with reality."<sup>7</sup> From the 1980s many African-American and African researchers have adopted an Afrocentric orientation to data. Queeneth Mkabela says, "Afrocentric method is derived from the Afrocentric paradigm which deals with the question of African identity from the perspective of African people as centred, located, oriented, and grounded."<sup>8</sup>

Afrocentricity is a paradigm that examines the African reality from the perspective of the African. It places the African experience at the core and recognizes and reaffirms the centrality of cultural experience as the place to begin to create a dynamic multicultural approach to research. Mkabela says, that Afrocentricity "is a philosophical and theoretical perspective that when applied to research can form the essential core of the idea."<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that Afrocentricity is not just about Africa or the African culture. Instead, its "fundamental aim is that all cultural centres must be respected."<sup>10</sup> To this end, Afrocentricity encourages "cultural and social immersion as opposed to scientific distance" in research as well as the use of tools and methods indigenous to the people being studied. The Afrocentric paradigm does not only advocate indigenization of tools and methods of investigation that African Christian researchers can use to make sense of their own realities but also the interpretation of research data from an African perspective. This means, "the Afrocentric paradigm locates research from an African viewpoint and

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6 One of the great proponents of Afrocentric method is Molefi K. Asante. See, Molefi K. Asante, Afrocentricity (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988).

7 Queeneth Mkabela, "Using the Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," in The Qualitative Report 10/1 (March 2005): 179.

8 Mkabela, "Using the Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," in The Qualitative Report 10/1 (March 2005): 179.

9 Mkabela, "Using the Afrocentric method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," in The Qualitative Report 10/ 1 (March 2005): 179.

10 Mkabela, "Using the Afrocentric method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," in The Qualitative Report 10/ 1 (March 2005): 180.

creates Africa's own intellectual perspective."<sup>11</sup> This method therefore:

Differs markedly in its reflexive sensitivity to its data and the manner in which it analytically explores the data. The aim is to be sufficiently detailed and sensitive to actual social contexts and to investigate the methodological bases or orderly character of ordinary social activities. This means that the researcher should understand that what s/he does and how s/he does it is specific to the culture (a situated response), the problem, and dynamics of the particular context. To achieve the understanding of this cultural framework requires indigenous African people's involvement and control of research.<sup>12</sup>

In general, "the Afrocentric paradigm challenges the dominant world-view of research and the production of knowledge by avoiding a mode of technocratic rationality that restricts diversity in terms of research methods."<sup>13</sup>

The Afrocentric approach is popular among African Christian researchers because of its participatory nature. It uses a research methodology that is collaborative. It allows African Christian researchers to learn with, by and from participants and "to create a working relationship in which the participants' (subjects') priorities and values become more fully expressed in research."<sup>14</sup> It does not treat the African Christian communities within which research is conducted as 'informants' but as participants and equal partners in the process of research.<sup>15</sup> This research methodology does not only emphasize and strengthen the African value of collective responsibility but also affirms the centrality of African ideals and values as legitimate frames of reference for conducting Christian research, from data collection to analysis and implementation.

The Afrocentric paradigm encourages a spiral methodology of data collection namely, the study area, the participants and the researchers, all interacting in a two-way manner, consistent with the African value of oneness.<sup>16</sup>

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11 Mkabela, "Using the Afrocentric method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," in The Qualitative Report 10/ 1 (March 2005): 180.

12 Mkabela, "Using the Afrocentric method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," in The Qualitative Report 10/ 1 (March 2005): 181.

13 Mkabela, "Using the Afrocentric method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," in The Qualitative Report 10/ 1 (March 2005): 181.

14 Mkabela, "Using the Afrocentric method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," in The Qualitative Report 10/ 1 (March 2005): 183.

15 This point is clearly explained by Mkabela, "Using the Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," in The Qualitative Report 10/ 1 (2005).

16 See, F. E. Owusu-Ansah & G. Mji, "African Indigenous Knowledge and Research," African Journal of Disability 2/1(2013): 3.

*The spiral method of data collection*<sup>17</sup>



The philosophical and theoretical paradigm underlying Afrocentricity is consistent with the African worldview. The African worldview includes wholeness, community and harmony which are deeply embedded in the African cultural values. Central to the African worldview is the strong orientation to collective values and harmony rooted in a collective sense of responsibility.

For meaningful African Christian research to take place, it is therefore important that the African worldview is not neglected because learning does not take place in a vacuum. That is why it is important that the African Christian researchers trained in Western-oriented methodologies should re-familiarize themselves with their African cultural context. As Mkabela says, “the Afrocentric method therefore, emphasizes a shift from dominant research methodologies to ways that are responsive to an African world-view which is collective; one in which the community itself will influence and shape the method.”<sup>18</sup>

The supporters of Afrocentric method say that they do not slander Western methodology, rather they re-examine and complement any thinking that attributes undue Western superiority at the expense of neglecting African thought. They go on to say that Afrocentric method can be used as a complement to qualitative research methods because the two methods share the same characteristics.

As a recap, Afrocentrists are a group of academics in a range of social science and humanities

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17 Mkabela, “Using the Afrocentric method in Researching Indigenous African Culture,” in The Qualitative Report 10/ 1 (March 2005): 185.

18 Mkabela, “Using the Afrocentric method in Researching Indigenous African Culture,” in The Qualitative Report 10/ 1 (March 2005): 187.



disciplines whose goal, is to produce scholarship in which Africans are the subjects, not the objects of scholarly discourse. There are many theories that have been advanced with the aim to understand Afrocentrism, the most common being that it is no more than Eurocentrism in black clothing. In his writings, Asante (a) denies borrowing structures from Eurocentrism and (b) delinks Afrocentrism from race. He says that whatever links exist are only coincidental.

We need, however, to continue raising pertinent questions: are there Africans we can consider as black Eurocentrics? Is there a possibility of having white Afrocentrics? Does Afrocentrism repudiate Western scholarly norms, and embrace instead an alternative black reality? Do Africanists such as Asante promulgate myth and not history? According to Asante, Afrocentrism is not about a specific collection of facts, it is about how we look at data.

[Dr. Molefi Kate Asante on Afrocentricity youtube](#)

In general, most of the African Christian researchers deal with two main issues: on the one hand, the meeting of the Gospel with African culture (inculturation/contextualization) and on the other, the Gospel and human promotion in Africa (liberation/identity). The two trends are not contradictory but rather complement each other. They represent two sides of the same process of making African Christian research truly African. Today, some of the African Christian researchers present a more unitary perception of contextualization and human promotion. This unitary outlook has produced a new trend in African Christian research one would call the reconstruction paradigm. The reconstruction paradigm is a phenomenon of the 1990s and therefore it is still in its infancy stage.

The beginning of the 1990s was characterized by positive changes both at the African and international levels. For instance, it was the end of the Cold War in which African countries had been caught up for decades. The end of the Cold War marked the end of communism. Before that, Africa had been a battlefield where the capitalist bloc and the communist bloc were fighting for geopolitical strategies and control of Africa. It was also the end of Apartheid in South Africa. This international political situation called for a new Christian response in Africa. Prior to 1990 African Christian research was mainly motivated by a struggle for African cultural identity and liberation. With the new wind of change the African Church felt the call to positively respond to this new situation which was for many researchers a sign of hope. Jesse Mugambi became the architect of this shift in African Christian

research.<sup>19</sup> He called the African Christian researchers to a new awareness of their role in the transformation of the African society.

A few African Christian researchers started to reflect on the meaning of the events in the context of their own countries. For instance, Charles VillaVicencio proposed a theology of reconstruction based on the respect of law and human rights in South Africa. He called the church to take part in the building of a new South Africa.<sup>20</sup> Referring to the events taking place in the Democratic Republic of Congo Kä Mana proposed a model of reconstruction of Africa based on the theology of resurrection and salvation in Christ. He is well known for having proposed the model of the life-death-resurrection of Christ event. He proposed a new society that passes from political ethics to Christological ethics and politics.

The reconstruction paradigm calls an African Christian researcher to articulate in public domain, Jesus Christ as the horizon of people's existence. The reconstruction paradigm comes with the challenge of what to do between the place of the logic in the public square and the logic of love as manifested by Christ. In this regard, the reconstruction of Africa must begin with the principles of structuring of people's social and spiritual consciousness.

Advocates of the reconstruction paradigm have called for a stop to the model of identity and cultural consciousness among the African Christian researchers. Time has come to make a shift from Afrocentric approach to reconstructive transformation of Africa. Afrocentrism is seen as not sufficiently adequate to address the new social, political and spiritual situation in Africa. In the view of the advocates of reconstruction paradigm, Afrocentrism responded to a situation of ecclesiastical and colonial bondage which no longer obtains. In place of the Afrocentric paradigm, which was mainly “reactive” African Christian researchers should promote a “proactive” model of reconstruction.

Mugambi, Villa-Vicencio and Kä Mana are so far the leading scholars in the field of reconstruction. People who have studied these leading scholars' works on reconstruction have had honest comments about this new paradigm. For instance, Tinyiko Maluleke has questioned the wisdom of advocates of reconstruction in asking Africans to forget their past history and culture in order to face the new

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19 Jesse Mugambi's idea of reconstruction was first articulated into a book: “From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War that was published in 1995. In 2003 Mugambi published another volume on reconstruction under the title: Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction.”

20 Charles Villa-Vicencio published a book with the title: A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights.

challenges. According to Maluleke, the advocates of reconstruction model are jumping too quickly from Egypt to Canaan, from exile to post-exile. He says that any African Christian researcher who asks the African people to forget their past and historical experience in the rush to reconstruction in the emerging realities miss an essential point in the contextual reality of Africans.

### **Uniqueness of African Christian research**

Today a number of research centres, universities, regional, national and local associations have been founded with the specific aim of promoting African Christian research. The question to be asked is, is there any uniqueness in African Christian research? How can African Christian research maintain its own unique identity while embracing Western methodologies? These questions do not have ready-made answers. I raise them here just to stimulate ideas and discussions on the way forward. However, the majority of African Christian researchers are of the view that African Christian research in general is unique because of the uniqueness of the African continent. However, this does not mean that African Christian research is so unique as to be completely divorced from all other human experiences. African Christian research is unique in the sense that it is only meaningful in the context of the African experience and worldview which is arguably different from any other worldview. African Christian researchers operate within the broad scope of the nature of the meeting of the Gospel message with the African culture and reality.

### **Characteristics of African Christian research**

African Christianity and its methods of inquiry cannot be divorced from an African's worldview. It is this worldview that shapes consciousness and forms the theoretical framework within which data is gathered, analyzed and conclusions drawn. The aim of this presentation has been therefore (a) not only to stimulate new thoughts but also to generate discussion on the wealth of African Christian research. (b) not to belittle known Western methods of investigation but to highlight the point that, as Asante says, it is not helpful to advance any one method of investigation as universal.<sup>21</sup> At the moment, many African Christian researchers are stuck to the research pathways mapped out by foreign methodologies, within which many have been trained. In carrying out Christian research African researchers need to develop and use alternative methods of inquiry. African Christian research is generally experiential in nature and is based on a worldview and a culture that is basically relational.

African Christian research has a practical and collective slant. Considering that culture is the 'lens'

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21 Molefi K. Asante, The Afrocentric Idea (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 168f.

through which an African perceives, interprets and makes sense of his or her reality, if we speak of the inclusion of African reality in any investigation, we would be speaking about the examination of African reality from the perspective of the African and not with the African on the periphery.

### **Limitations of African Christian research**

What African Christian researchers are doing is to create a Christian research that arises from and is accountable to African Christians. African Christian researchers in responding to the African realities will continue to deal with some very old problems in new contexts. The challenge is to explore how African culture has come into contact with the Christian and Western thought-pattern and to emphasize those things that unite Christians of various races, cultures and traditions.

Trying to state the Christian message for new situations involves bringing together the universal norm given in Christ with a situational norm arising in the African situation. In this process, African Christian research faces the risk of losing the truth claims of the Gospel by aiming at relevance and of being irrelevant out of the concern to preserve the abiding Gospel.

The future of African Christian research depends on how researchers in Africa get the right balance between the universal norm given in Christ and the situational norm arising in the African realities. The temptation to cling to Western tools and methodologies in African Christian research is a common challenge to many African Christian researchers.<sup>22</sup> Another constraint is associated with the difficulty of publication in reputable international journals for African Christian researchers.

### **The Way forward**

The thrust of this presentation has been to heighten awareness, stimulate new thoughts and generate discussion on the wealth of African Christian research. African Christian researchers need to persist in developing and using alternative methods of studying the African reality and refrain as much as possible from sticking to the research pathways mapped out by Western methodologies, within which many of us have been trained. Although it is not my intention to negate or denigrate known Western methods of investigation, at the same time I want to challenge African Christian researchers into alternative methods of inquiry as far as the investigation of African Christian-based research is

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22 For a detailed discussion of this point see, H. Azuma, "Psychology in a Non-Western Country," in International Journal of Psychology 19 (1984): 45-55; E. Mporu, "Psychology in sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges, Prospects and Promises" in International Journal of Psychology 37/3(2002):179-186; A. B. Nsamenang, "Factors Influencing the Development of Psychology in sub-Saharan Africa" in International Journal of Psychology 30/6(1995): 729-739.

concerned. There are African Christian researchers who have taken on the important yet daunting task of making relevant to the African Christian reality, Western theories and constructs believing that African methodologies have much to enrich existing Western methodologies.