

Tangaza College

The Catholic University of Eastern Africa

THE AFRICAN FAMILY: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO THE TRINITY.

An Essay Submitted to the Systematic Theology Department in Partial
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the B.A. Degree in Religious Studies.

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DEDICATION

To my parents and friends who taught me things no teacher could.

DECLARATION

THESIS TITLE:

AFRICAN FAMILY: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO THE TRINITY.

I, the undersigned, declare that this is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflections. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Religious studies. It has never been submitted to any college or university for academic credit.

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CHAPTER I

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the Christian revelation. In fact the confession of one God in three persons is rightly regarded as proper and specific to Christian faith and revelation. This Trinitarian confession is and will always remain a mystery, a problem that believers have to contend with. Through the ages, theologians of various cultural milieus have given different interpretations to the Trinity. These theologians have used analogies and theoretical categories that helped their contemporaries to understand and appreciate the mystery of the Trinity.

It is the contention of this essay that an African understanding of the mystery of the Trinity cannot rely on categories and models that are not close to their own reality. The study like the one we are taking is focused on using a category and model close to the African cultures. There are several images used to depict the Trinity. In this work we have taken the family as an appropriate image.

The approach is in line with the AMECEA Bishops and the Synod of 1995 proposal; the '*Church as Family of God*'. This theological 'discovery' was provoked by the need for a better and integral understanding of the Church and the Christian faith in general.

In this paper the focus is to show how the African model of the Family helps in understanding the Trinity. What are the problems to address?

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Traditional African conceived of God as One. He is all-good and yet punishes. This God is far and removed from the worldly affairs. He is not involved in the daily activities of the

living. The African people then, are said to have 'feared' God, as he does not mingle easily with mortals. This point must not be seen as contradicting Mbiti's thesis that Africans are notoriously religious. Religiosity and God mingling with mortals cannot be juxtaposed.

On the other hand, the Christian God is one, a Trinity, three persons One. This God is a personal God, very close and involved in the lives of his people. God is incarnate in the Son, Emmanuel – God with us and the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. Divine life is communicated from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit to us. The Christian God is Love itself.

With the two worldviews we see a confrontation and a difficulty in understanding the Trinity in Africa. The Trinity presupposes the revelation of God to humanity. This self-revelation of God helps human beings to come to salvation and the knowledge of God. We can ask, "What are we out to achieved in this paper?"

1.2Objectives

Our objectives are:

- a) Seeking to re-interpret the mystery of the Trinity in order to give it a permanent place in African belief system/s. The re-interpretation is to build a bridge of communication to a better understanding of the Trinity. This will be a process from the known to the mystery.
- b) To discover a way of speaking and seeing the divine in Africa especially in the family.
- c) To see how the conception and talk about God affects the way of living and relationships, hence authenticating the Christian prayer and witness.
- d) To reveal some values of the African human family which are essential to our comparative model.

- e) To stress that the Trinitarian communion is a great challenge to the family and society at large.
- f) To indicate another way of doing the theology of inculturation in Africa.

1.3 Significance of the Study

In July 1999, the writer of this paper went for pastoral experience in a rural parish – Nyabondo in Kisumu Archdiocese. Fortunately, he was there for the great feast of the Holy Trinity, the liturgy was very colourful. The parish priest with all his humility tried to re-express the mystery of the Trinity using the analogy of the three cooking stones, this was very striking. The model of three cooking stones is a powerful analogy for the Trinity in Africa.

In modern times, we have two stone stoves that even do better cooking than the three stones stove. The homily was a challenge with a question to ask and more to seek for. What other analogies can be used to re-express the Trinity in Africa?

The use of imagery is fine but when it is not exhaustive in its illustration of the unknown, it presents a lot of inadequacies. The three cooking stones are equal in size and they support the cooking pot at the fireplace. The three stones need one another. They work together and without one the cooking process is impossible.

The imagery used in the sermon should not only have brought out the idea of dependence but also the flow in the Trinity –The Father as the giver, the source of all that flows, namely; divinity and importantly the communion of the three, given the African context. The roles must also be specified. Each of the three persons in God has a specific role. This has to be expressed in any analogy to be used.

The approach in this paper is embedded on the African communal world-view. Community is foundational to the African world-view. It pervades the African consciousness.¹ Community calls for participation of all members in decision-making, especially those, which govern life. The community takes responsibility of all its members. In the community, there is respect for the diverse individuality of its membership. Participation, common responsibility and respect for diverse individuality are three criteria that determine a genuine African community.

The model of the African family represents inclusiveness where differences are present and accepted. Similarly, the Trinity is a symbol of unity in diversity. This approach is to act as a critique and inspiration for the family and society.

In this work, we have tried to get a comparative model for the Trinity in the African cultural settings, a model that, hopefully, is useful in dealing with Africa's numerous problems. The condition here is that the African family has to understand itself as a Trinity with the mission of building a community of solidarity at the service of humanity.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

It is appropriate to indicate some hurdles to the approach that we have taken in this paper. How do we present a Triune God without losing the sense of mystery? The reason then why we set hurdles is to preserve the sense of mystery yet make the Trinity real to the varied situations in Africa. What is the future of the family -especially in Africa, with the numerous wars in the Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo among others?

Africa is caught up in a revolution; something very dynamic, almost beyond human control. We underscore influence of the numerous peace efforts being made internationally and locally to see to an end to these upheavals. Looked at positively we can say there is an

¹ A. Okechukwu Ogbonnay. On Communitarian Divinity. An African Interpretation of the Trinity (New York: Paragon House, 1994), xii.

emerging new era of reconstruction from the pre-colonial times, the need of a second independence if will. The conditions of human life are put at a higher risk by among others, insecurity, disease, hunger, poverty, population explosion, environmental exploitation and pollution. Many countries in Africa are now experiencing political instability, civil strife, coups and counter-coups, refugee problems, tribalism, inflation, corruption and many social evils. These situations are either internally or externally motivated.² They have a great impact on the family as an institution.

What is the hope for survival of the values of the African family, given the above problems? With the changes that are sweeping across Africa, what is the future of the family? Can the Trinity be reflected in the midst of the violence, abuses, and discomforts in the African family today? We will now we take a brief look at the African Worldview.

1.5 African worldview: A summary

The worldview of any particular group of people colours everything. It gives shape to their way of thinking, acting and believing. "In the African worldview, all things hang together, all depend on each other and on the whole."³ The African world-view is anthropomorphic with a place for a monarch God within it. African worldview has several components, namely, the concept of God, the person, creation, destiny, values and morals.

The person is always seen as one who relates with the others. The sense of community and solidarity is strong in many African cultures. Nobody is without the community, "I am because we are". The person is never isolated from the community. The meaning of life and

² Emmanuel Barbára, "The Family as the Path for the New Millennium," African Christian Studies, vol. 15, no. 4 (December 1999), 22.

³ Bénézet Bujo, African Theology in its Social Context, trans. John O'Donohue (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications, 1992), 23.

person is got from belonging to the community. Therefore, outside the community one falls and is counted as dead. Belonging to a community is vital. Feasts are supposed to be celebrated as community. Community in African societies is expressed in the extended family.⁴

In African culture, the community plays a leading role with various points of reference. These points are; blood and marital kinship, land, tribal and clan roots, ritual (especially initiations, membership of societies, ranks and conferring of honors or titles in some communities) and indeed common/ communal suffering through foreign domination, famines and other catastrophes.⁵ The community is basically where the common meanings and values are shared. The basic form of this community where the person is to be linked is the family. The family is then linked to the village, the clan and the tribe or ethnic group. All these are in relationship and in solidarity with the ancestors of the community.

Ancestors are a typical element of the African worldview and religion. Africans are never separated from their departed ancestors. Both the living and the dead form one large community. Therefore the living and dead are always united.⁶

The Africans have a belief in a Supreme Being, God. Geographical location, history, cultural and social-political factors largely influence the African concept of God. Therefore, God is seen in anthropological terms. At the same time, God is also conceptualized in moral ethical – daily living and relationships.⁷ God under these circumstances becomes a major feature of African thinking and life.

⁴ Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, Towards an African Narrative Theology (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996), 116.

⁵ John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (London: Heinemann, 1969), 36.

⁶ P. Wasswa Mpagi, "Theology of the Departed and a Suggested Service," African Christian Studies vol. 5, no. 3 (September 1983), 43.

⁷ Laurenti Magesa, African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant life (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1998), 248.

Mbiti gives a very elaborate understanding of God. We will highlight some of these to get a sketch of the concept of God in Africa. God has intrinsic, external and moral attributes.⁸ These attributes can then be grouped as follows: what God does, human picture of God, the nature of God and peoples relationship with God.⁹

What God does: He creates, sustains creation, provides for creation, and rules over the universe among others.

Human images of God: He is father (for patrilineal societies), mother (for matrilineal societies) or parent. God is a friend. He has bodily parts and so God is capable of seeing and hearing, eating, sleeping and getting angry. All these have a high value in Africa.

Nature of God (Moral attributes): loving, goodness, holy, kind, justice and righteousness, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, transcendent and immanent, self-existence, pre-eminence, invisibility, unity and plurality, God as spirit.

God relates with the universe as a creator. As the creator, he provides for all his creation, he gives them light, rain, food, fertility and health. God is thus seen as the one who orders the universe. Relationships are important. Human beings must maintain a good relationship with their creator. In fact the good harmony is the vital force of the universe and community.¹⁰ When harmony fails in the universe God may afflict his creation.¹¹

According to Mbiti, afflictions are mysteries that often defy explanation. God who is incomprehensible and mysterious causes them. God is described as shrouded with a mystery deeper than can be fathomed; the African titles for God and attributes manifest this

⁸ See John S Mbiti, Concepts of God in Africa (London: S.P.C.K., 1970), 3-42.

⁹ See John S. Mbiti, Introduction To African Religion, 2nd ed., (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers, 1994), 51-59.

¹⁰ See Magesa, Op. Cit., 249.

¹¹ Mbiti, Concepts of God in Africa, Op. Cit., 80.

experience. The African people do not by any means experience God as an equal. They experience God in relationship with the universe, an experience of causality and dependence. God is experienced in their history – everyday living -as one with no equal.

Death in many African cultures is not a total annihilation it is but a transition to another form of existence elsewhere.¹² The dead members of the family or clan have a great bearing on the living thus the practise of Ancestral cult. Ancestors are supposed to be honoured or venerated. The living, have the responsibility of remembering their dead. This constant memory is kept by naming children after the dead, pouring libation during anniversaries and memorials.¹³ These are acts to show solidarity and communion with the dead. The dead joins the world of spirits.

Values and morals are basically the ideas that safeguard life in the community.¹⁴ Justice, truth, love, evil, beauty, decency, respect of peoples property, the keeping of promises and agreements, praise and blame, crime and punishment, the rights and responsibilities of both the individual and community, character integrity.¹⁵

1.6 A Synthesis

The African concept of God is a solitary monarch, living in the detached isolation of his glory. Our problem will be how to reconcile this concept (solitary monarch) with the Christian proclamation of a God who is a Trinity. The three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a novelty that to the African traditional religious experience. A Christian novelty that has developed how God wishes to be known and loved.¹⁶

¹² Aloys Otieno Ojore, "Levirate Unions Among The Luo: A Case Study In Kisumu District"(M. A. Thesis, Catholic University of Eastern Afarica, 1995), 14.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mbiti, Introduction To African Religion, Op. Cit., 12.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Cf. Bujo, Op. Cit., 18.

Africans do not have any physical representation of God. They use metaphorical language to describe him.¹⁷ The specific names given to God speak of this metaphorical language used when referring to God. These names are rich and have a profound meaning.

African world-view sees everything as embodiment of Morals, dealing with right and wrong, what is wrong and evil in human conduct. They also keep the society from disintegration. The African sense of right and wrong is deep. Morals produce the virtues of friendship, compassion, love, honesty, justice, courage, self-control, helpfulness and bravery.¹⁸

In this essay, we have begun with an Introduction and overview of the African worldview in connection with the concept of God. Our Specific focus will be the African Traditional family not overlooking the modern family that will enrich our discussion. Chapter two deals with the African family (towards an African definition of the family). The third Chapter is focused on the analogy of the Trinity in Africa. The fourth chapter will be the interpretation of the findings. We will in this chapter see how all that we have in the previous chapters fits in together.

¹⁷ Mbiti, Concepts of God in Africa, Op. Cit., 12.

¹⁸ _____, Introduction To African Religion, Op. Cit., 174.

CHAPTER II

2.0 TOWARDS AN AFRICAN DEFINITION OF THE FAMILY

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we have described ways through which the African culture can be looked. In this chapter will concentrate on the African family. We shall get a working definition for the African family, even though it does not exist in its pure form today. We shall go through what the family is today.

What characterizes an African family? These must be qualities that are African and are not found anywhere in the world and can be used very well to identify the family in Africa. We will also assess the changing patterns that have greatly influenced the African families. The changing patterns have had a great impact on the roles played in the family and the society at large.

The Traditional African family and the Christian family (modern family) attempt to set the stage eventually for talking about the Trinitarian model of the family. Both, Traditional African and Christian points of view present the family as an indispensable structure basic to all cultures at all times.

2.2 The African Family

The family is a basic unit of every society. What are the peculiar characteristics of an African family that makes it unique? According to Charles Nyamiti an African family is unique and original. He says:

“It includes all living members of these groups, besides being mystically connected to the ancestors and, through social pacts, to outsiders such as

friends and others. Besides, membership within the African family (clan and tribe) usually brought about by special initiation rites showing thereby the sacredness of the family. In other words the category "family" in Africa evokes not only blood communal membership of few living members, but also the themes of clan, tribe, affinity, maternity, *patria potestas*, priesthood ancestors (thereby including the themes of mythical time, archetypes, heroes founders), initiation and hence fecundity, life, power, sacrality, and so forth."¹⁹

In traditional society, "the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who may have their own children and other immediate relatives".²⁰ The dead and the unborn also were included as part of the family. The dead/living dead had to be remembered by the living. These living dead were considered to be 'alive' in the memory of the surviving family members, thus they had a great influence on the life of the living. This shows that the African family was extensive.

In the traditional African family individuals were closely bound to each other, either by blood or marriage and because of living together. Each member of the family had rights and responsibilities. Parents had the duty to look after children, protect them, educate them, discipline them, and bring them up to be well behaved and integrated. Children on the other hand had the duty to obey their parents, to help others, to be honest, to be generous and considerate, hospitable, hardworking and friendly with one another.²¹ Children were also expected to care for their parents at old age. This was relatively easy because members of the family resided in one village. Today this is not possible as children have either been taken away from their families for studies in boarding schools or universities or in search of employment. The consequence of this mobility is the feeling of loneliness and at time frustration for the parents especially.

¹⁹ Charles Nyamiti, "Approaches to African Theology," The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Underside of History, ed. by S. Torres And V. Fabella (New York: Maryknoll Orbis Books, 1978), 39.

²⁰ Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, Op. Cit., 106.

²¹ _____, Introduction to African Religion, Op. Cit., 176.

The African Traditional family is also the platform on which one is exposed and integrated into the society. This was done progressively through the rites of passage from adolescence through to Adulthood into marriage. These rites made the individual, the youth to totally belong to the society. The rites of passage made the 'initiate' a new person who was now bond forever to the society, i.e. fully incorporated into the community.

The African feels a sense of loyalty to community. In fact this loyalty transcends the geographical boundaries, so much so that when a person is in a different geographical location he or she is not considered out of community.²² The Community in Africa extends and includes both the living and the dead, even the unborn.

The African concept of community holds the individual and the community in balance. Thus the Kiswahili adage "Mtu ni Watu" (The person is the Community). The philosophical formula is that 'I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am'.²³ Therefore there is mutual trust, help and respect for personal freedom as well as mutual responsibility.²⁴ These values are expressed during the various moments of life namely; during marriage ceremonies, circumcision, funerals, e.t.c. This shows that the group affects the whole life of the individual. The community makes the individual.

In the traditional family there a deep sense of sharing. This sharing can happen even in the absence of a constant direct face-to-face encounter or even immediate biological connection. A good example is the extended family. Indeed, the African family is a community that extends itself beyond even those whom we remember or with whom we are conscious of

²² Ogbonnay, Op. Cit., 8.

²³ See Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, Op. Cit., 36.

²⁴ John Mutiso-Mbinda, "African Background for Community Building," AFER, Vol. 19, no. 5 (October 1977), 299.

being connected. African life is therefore centred on community and family. The individuals are essential in and of themselves for the generative contribution of a world.²⁵

The African sense of family brings the idea of complementarity. The role of each member of the family is very well defined and each knows what he or she is supposed to do. The husband has the role as the father, to be the protector and the symbol of unity. The mother as wife is seen as one who disseminates love, care, calm, peace and tenderness. Children are considered as blessings to the family. At the same time they are comforters to the parents and helpers of the aged or the sick family members.²⁶

Plural marriages were common in the traditional settings. This form of marriage lead to polygamous families, which is composed of two or more nuclear families, linked by a common parent or father. Polygamy raised the social status of the family in question. As a common practise it instilled in the African people the idea that a big family earns its head great respect in the eyes of the community.

The common scenario was that many of the rich families were made up of polygamous marriages. In cases where the first wife had no children, or had only daughters, the husband had no choice but to get a second or even a third and so forth. This form of marriage was partly seen as an immediate remedy to childlessness and a way to remove the shame of apparent unproductivity. Polygamy was also viewed as a help to prevent or reduce unfaithfulness and prostitution, especially on the part of the husband.²⁷

Polygamy is a reality in many African societies. This form of marriage where a man runs two or more homes is socio-culturally accepted. Critics of this form of marriage have argued that

²⁵ Ogbonnay, Op. Cit., 10.

²⁶ Francis Anekwe Oboriji, "Trends in African Theology Since Vatican II: A Missiological Orientation," Rome 1998, 204.

²⁷ Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, Op. Cit., 143.

monogamous unions are the only surest way of ensuring marital rights for the partners involved. Polygamy, they argue denies or violates the rights of the individuals. It does not sufficiently meet the needs of the partners. Monogamy they assert is the only form that is appropriate and ethically correct. The Catholic Church is encouraging this form of marriage and many African families today aspire for monogamy.

The definition or descriptions of an African family to take into account the real life situation or context of Africa today. This will include the socio-economic and political situation. Any definition that avoids these crucial factors is impractical, as it is unfair to the challenges posed on the African social and political context.

The family in Africa is going through very hard and trying times. The problems facing the family are basically because of poverty and these are a result of unending foreign debts, tribal conflicts/ clashes, regional wars, poor governance, power struggle and the AIDS epidemic. In short we can say that what effects social context above of the family in Africa today is marginalisation and hopelessness.²⁸

2.3 The Family Today

The current modern African family is neither wholly traditional nor wholly Western. The African family today is at the point to merging the traditional and Western values. There is a trend in many African families to take up to the western way of life, as it seems to give them a way to avoiding the many traditional practices. These practices would include; paying of bride wealth, the initiation rite and other traditional practices that they consider 'repugnant'.

²⁸ E. A., Orobator, The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 69.

In the urban areas the financial and social constraints are gradually shaping the model of the family today. The legislation in many Post-Colonial African countries on marriage and family life has also contributed a lot to what a contemporary African family is today. One of the predominant effects is the formation of nuclear families in Africa, that are cut-off from the extended family with very limited or no contact with the majority of their relatives.

Another factor has been cultural mixture and diversity. Although a large majority of families are still traditional in structure, some communities have managed to blend the traditional and modern family systems due to social influence. The magnitude of the change in the African family is therefore varied.

Patrilineal societies were very dominant in the traditional Africa. In a Patrilineal culture authority and decision-making lies with the male heads of the families. This has greatly influenced the modern patterns of the family in which women are left out most of the times in decision-making processes.

The nuclear families, the smallest and most elementary unit of the family composed of the husband, wife and their immediate offspring,²⁹ have spread in Africa. In the nuclear families the most important thing is the marital bond. There may still be a link between the extended family due to the economic hardships that the particular family is experiencing. The stability of the nuclear family sometimes hangs on a balance as long as it relies on the marital bond. Divorce, domestic violence, among other issues lead to disintegration of the family unit.

Single parent families in Africa are an emerging form of family union characterizing the modern society. Male or female adults constitute these families with their children only. Most of the single parent families are female headed. This phenomenon is due to various factors

²⁹ Agnes P. Zani, "The Family in its African Socio-Cultural Context," The Model of Church-as-Family (Catholic University of Eastern Africa Publications, 1999.), 49.

namely death or choice.³⁰ This type of family or status is seen as a failure in marriage and infidelity in married life.

2.4 Forces of change in the African Family

Today's marriage and family in Africa are in a crisis due to: dispersal of family members, the generation gap, urbanization, unstable partnerships and new forms of family unions. Thus the African synod considered evangelization of the African family a major priority.

"The future of the world and the church passes through the family. Not only is the Christian family the first cell of the living ecclesial community, it is also the fundamental cell of society. In Africa in particular, the family is the foundation on which the social edifice is built. This is why the synod considered the evangelization of the family a major priority..."³¹

The African family today is dragging itself through political, economic, social, and cultural difficulties that are violent and with far-reaching effects. This is characteristic of the contemporary society especially in the developing World.

Notwithstanding the above difficulties the African family has adopted the positive values of the present world order, while preserving its very essential and original values. The African family can and will eventually modify itself to accommodate globalisation. We can highlight some of the factors of the rapid change affecting the family and keeping it far from its ideals;

- The financial constraints with the ever-dwindling economies that have made the cost of living high. The result is that families languish in poverty thus not able to meet most of their basic needs.

³⁰ Ibid., 50.

³¹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995) 63.

- The political and social upheavals in most African countries have had a very negative impact on the family. Thus the family structure has been subjected to changes, basically because some of the family members are taken up in war or struggle for liberation.
- The other factor of change in the African family structure is globalisation. The world is becoming a small village, the media has almost penetrated every corner of the planet earth thus the influences from other cultures is unavoidable. The major issue here is that some of these cultures and ways of doing things if just aped without a critical assessment cause more harm than good.

2.5 Values of the Traditional African Family

The family is the person's channel of integration into the clan and the wider society.³² The supreme purpose of the family according to African people is to transmit life. The life handed on is not only biological "but life in its comprehensive sense of the strength of vital forces. It involves love and fidelity, faith and trust and the promotion of everything that fosters an ever-closer union..."³³.

The important event that characterizes the African family is marriage; in this institution the family comes into being and eventually life is transmitted. We must note here "that the Traditional African society was unitary and homogenous. The language, culture, beliefs, values and social institutions of the ethnic group were reduplicated in innumerable local village communities."³⁴

³² Magesa, Op. Cit., 113.

³³ Ibid., 114.

³⁴ Benezeri Kisembo, Magesa Laurenti and Shorter Alyward. African Christian Marriage (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 208.

Marriage has several meanings and purposes in Africa. We have mentioned the bearing of children and uniting link of life as values of the African family. Others are:

- The building of family.
- Providing for new social relationships, thus extending the web of kinship socially.
- Remembrance of the dead as a consequence the continuation of life beyond death.
- Marriage also brings people together, increasing the numbers.
- It gives individuals status in society, putting them on the physical map of the community.³⁵

In the values of the African family we may also add; fellowship, remembrance of the dead (living dead), respect, hospitality, communion, sharing, security, solidarity, and a strong sense of the divine (the father is regarded as the family priest he is both provider and point of reference for the tradition and the link with the ancestors) and inclusiveness. These values are the pillars of the family in Africa.³⁶ The African concept of the family is very wide and includes all the persons who belong to the same ancestry.

Extended family systems are a great value in Africa. African people value all those linked to them by blood, these they view as close and important to the family or society. The extended families emphasise blood ties over marital ties and trace descendants through paternal or maternal lines depending on whether they are patrilineal or matrilineal societies.³⁷

Community life and respect of traditions in the African family is another value. In the African family what is stressed is the togetherness, communion, respect of traditions and the

³⁵ See Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion, Op. Cit., 110–112.

³⁶ _____, African Religions and Philosophy, Op. Cit., 107.

³⁷ Zani, Op. Cit., 48.

unquestioning acceptance of what the ancestors have practised, sanctioned and established as the way things are done and not the legality.³⁸

Certain aspects of the Traditional African family must be criticised if the model of the family and the Trinity has to achieve the desired end. We will point out two: domination and polygamy. We must note that the African family, be it traditional or contemporary, is still very hierarchical. The father figure is still feared by the other members of the family. The women (majority) still feel inferior and the rights of Children is still something to be discussed, respected and realized.³⁹

The Traditional African society encourages polygamy, which is only practised by the minority. This form of family has certain negative aspects, which may include the domination of men over women thus denying them certain basic rights. These would be in areas like ownership of property and having an active voice in the family or clan's decision – making.

2.6 A Synthesis

The main theological theme of the Synod of Africa was the image of the Church as God's family. This is a new category, which has deepened the understanding of the "Church".⁴⁰ This should be a guiding ideal in imaging the Church and the Trinity in Africa.

The African family has to preserve its identity and essential values while changing some of these to adopt positive modernity. The family has to care for others, give warmth in human

³⁸ Oboriji, Op. Cit., 203.

³⁹ See John Mary Waliggo, "The Synod of Hope at a Time of Crisis in African", African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives, (N.Y.: Maryknoll Orbis Books, 1996), 208.

In this piece of work, the author is not underestimating the values of the African family but is only signalling a warning; a challenge that there are things to be clarified in the model of the family in Africa.

⁴⁰ Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, Op. Cit., 145.

relationships, be open to dialogue with and accept its neighbours and be a promoter of reconciliation and community. The prototype should be that of the Holy family of Nazareth. From it, the African Christian family is to learn the lesson of “silence of family life and of work.”⁴¹ The African concept of family is an extended family, is a whole network of relationships defined by kinship; it goes beyond the biological relationships. Mbiti says, “kinship is reckoned through blood and betrothal.”⁴² The African family has a sense of communion and solidarity thus a base for building a Trinitarian Theology.

Many African families keep the ideals of community, solidarity, and sharing. These ideals, still very strong today therefore we will become our background to a comparative model to approach the Trinity in Africa today.

⁴¹ John Paul II, Op. Cit.

⁴² Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, Op. Cit., 104.

CHAPTER III

3.0 ANALOGY OF THE TRINITY IN AFRICA

3.1 Introduction

The understanding to the Holy Trinity has been an all-intellectual. In Africa such an approach does not make sense, and as such is the wrong starting point in Africa.⁴³ The correct way to approach the mystery is by imitating the Trinity in our daily living. Therefore, our approach will concentrate not on the immanent Trinity but the economic Trinity that is more appropriate to Africa.

How can the Holy Trinity be imitated? What in our reality can be related to this divine mystery? In this essay, it is termed the “Comparative Approach to the Trinity”. The task of this chapter is to draw parallels from the Africa family to the Holy Trinity. We hope to draw a tentative solution (or even lasting) on how the Holy Trinity can be imitated and also to identify whatever is African that can be related to this divine mystery.

Hopefully the Trinity will become familiar to African believers when it is viewed as able to reinforce, prolong life and goodness to Africa. We shall take the approach that will not address the family as father-mother-child/children; the family here is used in terms of kin relationships (kinship). We concentrate on the aspects of the family kin structure (father, ancestor/s and life) that flows through the family.

The analogies we use here are by and large familiar to most African Cultures. This analogy has God the Father as “Father”, the Son as “Ancestor” and the Holy Spirit as “Life” – the

⁴³ Cf. Christopher Mwoleka, “Trinity and Community” *Spearhead*, no. 45 (1976), 15.

vital force. The above use of categories of God=Father is what Nyamiti⁴⁴ would call comparative analogy. He says it is useful and fruitful as it involves identification of African cultural items of categories with the Christian mysteries. The categories identified God =Father, Son =Proto-Ancestor and Holy Spirit =Life with the Christian mysteries are thus an identification by fusion that links the idea from one reality with another to making them almost identical.

The Trinity is first and foremost a family; the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The analogy of family is “powerfully evocative, being based on the most natural of human experiences, one that has been raised to a sacrament in the Christian faith.”⁴⁵ Consideration of the communion of the three distinct beings of the Trinity produces a critical attitude to personhood, community, society and the Church.⁴⁶ The greatest Trinitarian communion, however, consists precisely in its being a communion of three different beings; in it mutual acceptance of differences is the vehicle for the plural unity of the three persons.

The Trinity is the ideal of an African family. The image or symbolism that it portrays should be able to help all strive at building a strong family life. In an attempt to construct a “Trinitology”, “African Trinitology”, we will take as our starting point the Biblical teaching about the specific Persons of the Trinity and then strive to draw an analogy in the African cultural situation that are relevant to the Trinity.

⁴⁴ Cf. Charles Nyamiti, “The Trinity as the Source and Soul of African Family Ecclessiology,” *African Christian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (March 1999), 70.

⁴⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (New York: Maryknoll Orbis Books, 1988), 106.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

3.2 Images Expressive of the Trinity in Africa

3.2.1 God the Father

Recurrent in the Old Testament are themes and categories of 'Father', 'Word' and 'Spirit', which, although it would be presumptuous to claim as ultimate, are indispensable in the developing of a Biblical theology of the Trinity. Without these themes and categories in the Old Testament, it would be difficult to come to a full understanding of the Trinity. In the

Bible as a whole, the metaphorical usage of the term 'God' as Father suggests that he is the ultimate of original manifestation of a particular quality ("Father of mercies" in 2 Cor 1:3; "Father of Glory" in Eph 1:17), the specific Christian usage focuses on the concept of God as the Father of Jesus.⁴⁷

3.2.2 God as the Father of Israel

Israel, like all the other communities that surrounded it had the idea of God as Father. Therefore, God as Father was an old idea that had basically been revealed in the Biblical revelation. In the Old Testament, God is the universal and divine Father (Ex 4:22; Hos 11:1; Jer 31:9). The fatherhood of God and the sonship of Israel are therefore based not on myths but on the concrete experience of a saving historical act.⁴⁸ God is the creator and the ultimate origin of everything that exists.

Israel's sonship was not understood in a biological or mythical sense. The notion of God as Father, for the Israelites, was one of transcendence and immortality. Israel borrowed the notion of Father from its neighbours, in the process eliminating ideas that were negative. God as the creator of the universe remains always transcendent and the First Cause of all that

⁴⁷ Cf. The Anchor Biblical Dictionary, 1992 ed., s.v. "God."

⁴⁸ Walter Kasper, The God of Jesus Christ (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1984), 139.

exists; God is, therefore, the principle of unity.⁴⁹ God as Father elected, saved and sealed a covenant with Israel, as a pointer to the idea of a loving God. In the book of Second Samuel 7: 14 and Psalms 2: 7; 89: 27ff., there is a further development of the notion of God as 'Father'. Israel is now taken as God's Child: "I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me" (2 Sam 7: 14); and, "You are my son today I am your father." (Ps 2: 7)

In the New Testament, the use of 'Father' is basically to make a clear distinction between God and Jesus and also to show the close relationship that exists between the two (Jn 1, 14, 18; 3: 16, 18; 1Jn 4: 9). The New Testament, therefore, shows the fulfilment of the Fatherhood of God; God is not only presented as the Father of Jesus, but also as the Father of all who believe. This concept is already deeply rooted in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, it only goes a step further: God is a Father who disciplines (Heb 12:7) with the parental quality of love (1 Jn 3:1; 2 Thess 2:16; Eph 2: 4; Rom 8: 38-39) and compassion (Mt 6, 25-32).

3.2.3 God as the Father of Jesus Christ

The transition of the understanding of God as the Father of Jesus Christ and the connection with the Spirit, the concept of the Trinity as One God is not an easy one and must never be taken for granted. God derives His 'Fatherhood' as a definition from the relationship with His Son and from the relationship of this Son Jesus Christ with him. Jesus, who is Son, 'the real Son of God, begotten not made', with his life and message aids us to make the jump that His Father is the Father of all (human beings). This is the divine fatherhood. Jesus Christ is the "mediator and fullness" of all revelation. This implies that there is no other way of coming to know God except through Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, therefore, the full revelation of God's Fatherhood is explicated in the person of Jesus Christ. The New Testament is an

⁴⁹ Nicholas Fogliacco, "Class Notes on the Trinity, 1999," Tangaza College, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi., Pro Manuscripts.

unprecedented development of the Old Testament, that Jesus is the True Son of God, not only metaphorically, but in the true sense of the term. And God the Father is to be seen as the source of life and being. He is a Father-God, not an authoritarian God. He is a God who seeks more good for his children as he journeys with them to his eternal home. The Christian God, the Father of Jesus Christ, as presented in the Scripture is always near to his creation and is concerned about it.

John the Evangelist says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son..." (Jn 3:16). God's love for human beings was immeasurable, so great that he desired nothing else for them other than the Gift of His own Son. Therefore, God is Love.

In the revelation of God's Fatherhood, all human beings (who have accepted Christ in faith) are also made sons and daughters. However, Revelation tells us that this sonship is dependent on the divine Sonship of Jesus (Jn 1:12). These human beings are, consequently, adopted sons and daughters, now heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Rm 8: 17).

Jesus Christ as the proper Son of God is the fullness of revelation and, thus, the qualified mediator. "No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him" (Jn 1: 18). It is Jesus who reveals God. The objective of His revelation is Love; and the goal, our call to divine Sonship and life everlasting.

3.2.4 God as the Father of Africans

It has been noted above that the African ontology is anthropocentric: the human person is at the centre stage of existence and the African people see everything revolving around the human person. God is obviously the origin and the explanation of all that exists; yet, it is as if God's existence is solely for the sake of the human person.

The Africa people have images of God, which can be proved by their titles and descriptions of God. This is a testimony to the richness of the concepts and understanding of God in the Traditional Religions of Africa: He is Creator, Potter, Father, Provider, to mention but a few. The Fatherhood of God is seen in the prayers that the African people used. Thus, he has the image of a personal 'Father' who is approached in times of need. God is the "Father", "Great Father" (the Bambuti of Congo), "Father of My Fathers" (the Tswana of Botswana and South Africa).

The African people see God as one who cares, helps and protects the community. God does this purely as Creator, the originator; this is presented by the different myths of the African cultures. It can, therefore, be said that many Africans visualize God, as 'Father' because he is the universal Creator and provider and, in a more existential way, this God - Father is personally available to the people in times of need, e.g. danger, despair, sickness, sorrow, drought or any other calamity.

The problem is that this God - Father is modelled on the male dominated mentality: he is powerful and overbearing; he also punishes. This God is feared not loved, because the concept is heavily anthropocentric.

In the African Traditional religions, God is usually approached through mediators such as Ancestors, who because of their closeness to God are able to facilitate our relationship with Him. Therefore, the Africans should be able to appreciate the role played by Christ as mediator and the way to God the Father. Other ways of approaching God in Africa are through worship, prayer, sacrifice and offering, singing and dancing. These ways of approaching God make Africans feel that God is close to them and they to him.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion, Op. Cit., 69.

3.2.5 God the Father and the experience in the African family

The image of God as 'Father' as experienced by Jesus stands to correct the Traditional African and, perhaps, the modern approach of a father in the family. In the African family set up, the father's authority is not to be challenged and his orders are unquestionable. However, an Ideal African Father is he who:

- Heads his household
- Intercedes for his Children with the ancestral spirits
- Gives love to all the family members
- Comforts all in times of sorrows
- Is faithful to his wife and to his role as a father
- Is shepherd of his family
- Forgives all when they go wrong
- Is an example of goodness for both his wife and children⁵¹

God being divine has all the above qualities, and more, only, in a nobler manner. God's love for his people in the Old Testament is shown by the covenant – the bond of love. He is ever faithful to Israel, his chosen people. Jesus experienced God as '*Abba*'; this shows the unique type relationship that exists between God and his Son. This intimacy of Father and Son characterizes the whole life of Jesus and finds its ultimate expression as a form of address to God (Mk.14: 36).

⁵¹ Ojore, Op. Cit., 149.

Secondly, *God so loved the world that he sent his only Son* (Jn 3:16). Therefore, Jesus' incarnation is not out of his own will or initiative but he is 'sent' or given to humanity by the Father. This is part of revelation – that God loves us and has concern for us.

3.3 Jesus the Proto-Ancestor

At Ceasarea Philippi, Jesus put two questions to his followers:

- a) Who do people say I am? (Lk 9, 18 –20)
- b) Who do you say I am? (Mt 16, 13 –16)

The disciples gave their answer. Africa, too, has given her answer; this way: "You are Christ the Chief, Christ the Ancestor, Christ the Elder Brother," (Francois Kabasele); "You are Jesus Christ the Healer" (Cece Kolie); "You are Christ the Ideal Elder" (Patrick Wachege); "You are Christ the Liberator" (Laurenti Magesa); "You are Jesus, Our Ancestor (Charles Nyamity); and, "You are Christ, the Proto-Ancestor" (Benezet Bujo).

Jesus is the "Proto-Ancestor", the "unique ancestor" who is the source of life and the highest model of all ancestorship.⁵² Jesus, by his incarnation, assumed the human state, which includes the human history and the aspirations of the ancestors. In him is, therefore, is the unity of the past, present and future community, including the community of the dead. The incarnation thus becomes the key to seeing Christ as the Proto-Ancestor.

Ancestors are the nearest to human beings in terms of proximity. They are a category of people necessarily departed. One doesn't qualify as an ancestor by simply dying. Yes, death is a rite of passage, but not a qualification to ancestorhood. There are conditions that hinder one (the dead) from this prestigious position. These include childlessness, barrenness in

⁵² Bujo, African Theology in its Social Context, Op. Cit., 144.

women or sterility in men, physical handicap (cripples) and social misfit, dying far away from home, and expulsion from the community or society (outcasts).⁵³

The African concept of ancestorship is varied. But the fact is that Africans have a specific reverence for the Ancestors. Broadly speaking, ancestorship has some five basic concepts that may be important to note:

- i. Kin relationship between the ancestor and his or her earthly relatives.
This is called consanguinity or non-consanguinity
- ii. Supernatural status (implying sacred condition), super-human forces
spiritual qualities and special nearness to God
- iii. Mediation (non dispensable) between the Supreme Being and earthly
kin
- iv. Exemplarity of behaviour
- v. Right or title to regular sacred communication with their living
relatives through prayers and ritual offerings⁵⁴

Kinship can be parental, brotherly/sisterly, clanic, tribal or linked by common founder or common membership in a Religious or secret society.⁵⁵ The dead must attain a certain reputation – power and respect among the living – to be ancestors. Reputation may include aspects like fame and material success. Many children, relatives and friends, wealth and hospitality can be added to the list of reputation. Bolaji,⁵⁶ points out that only good people

⁵³ See Aylward Shorter, African Christian Theology (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 126.

⁵⁴ See Charles Nyamiti, "The Mass as Divine and Ancestral Encounter between the Living and the Dead," African Christian Studies, vol.1, no.1 (August 1995), 28-30.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁶ Idowu Bolaji, African Traditional Religion, A Definition (London: SCM. Press, 1973), 187.

became ancestors after a compliment of “Well Done” judgement of the Deity. The wicked will be cast into the rubbish heap, “Hell”.

Pobee⁵⁷ describes ancestors as those who are part of the clan and have completed their course here on earth and are gone ahead to the other world to be elder brothers and sisters of the living at the house of God. The elements that qualify one to be an ancestor, then, would include old age, offspring and exemplary life.

Ancestors are believed to have a permanent relationship with the living. They form one community with them.⁵⁸ The intimate relationship with the ancestors keeps the earthly community alive and preserves it from collapsing.⁵⁹ Ancestors have a great influence on the course of life here and now. They can influence life for good or ill. Ancestors have a notable contribution in making a good harvest, healthy children and the sanction of good moral living. Kwesi A. Dickson adds a note: that the land also belongs to the ancestors.⁶⁰

Given that ancestors make part of the African community, they occasionally appear in a variety of ways. They visit the living and give opportune messages.⁶¹ Their appearance could be in the form of dreams or human bodies or, when they are displeased by the behaviour of an individual or community, in the form of some monstrosity or as animals. Ancestors were also considered founders of the clans. They are, therefore, referred to as protectors of the society, direct watchdogs of the moral behaviour of the individual, family, clan and even the entire society.

Evidently, ancestorhood has a profound meaning among the African people and cultures. Ancestors have “written down” autobiographies. These are people who have left behind

⁵⁷ J. S. Pobee, Towards An African Theology (Nashville: Abingdon press, 1979), 46.

⁵⁸ Mpagi, Op. Cit., 45.

⁵⁹ Bujo, Op. Cit., 19.

⁶⁰ Dickson A. Kwesi, Theology in Africa (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 64.

⁶¹ Mpagi, Op. Cit., 45.

definite footprints, people who have lived full circle, successfully completing their journey. They have handed down to their descendants a wealth of experience. Therefore the life of the ancestor must be able to build up the life of the community.

In Jesus of Nazareth, we see the African ancestor-ideal. He is set as an ancestor with a new fulfilment. The gospels tell us that Jesus healed the sick, performed miracles, raised the dead and gave the blind back their sight. Jesus is, then, seen as a promoter of life, the vital force, one who left us a legacy: the legacy of love; love of neighbour.⁶²

The life of Jesus is a manifestation of the life of an African Ancestor. The term ancestor is only applied to Jesus analogically, "since to treat him otherwise would be to make him only one founding ancestor among many. That is why the title "Proto-Ancestor" is reserved to Jesus."⁶³ Jesus has become the new locus for understanding the ancestors.

The African now has something to say about the mystery of incarnation; God has spoken in various moments of human history, including through our ancestors. "In these last days he speaks to us through his son, whom he has established as unique Ancestor, as Proto-Ancestor, from whom all life flows for His descendants (cf. Heb 1,1-2)."⁶⁴ Jesus is saviour. His words and deeds must be passed down the centuries to all his descendants and generations.

Christ as the Proto-Ancestor liberates the community and the individual from all sorts of evil (including evils at the modern socio-economic and political level). He is the ancestor who emancipates the African people from all new forms of oppression such as disease, poverty, hunger, ignorance and women subjection.

⁶² Bujo, *Op. Cit.*, 80.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 81

In conclusion, Christ is our Ancestor and Brother, our Elder Brother (kinship). As God and human being, He is Supremely Holy (sacredness), our unique mediator (mediation) and the perfect model of our Christian life (exemplariness). Being our God and redeemer, He is entitled to our perpetual attachment to Him through prayer and ritual (sacred communication).

Christ is our Ancestor. God the Father too becomes is our Father Ancestor through Christ's ancestorship to us.⁶⁵ Christ is the reconciling mediator, ancestor, healer, elder brother, and liberator, king and chief. His being our ancestor opens a door to the disciplines of the Trinity, Ecclesiology and Eschatology.

3.3.1 Jesus Proto-Ancestor Mediator of 'New Life'

Jesus as the Son of God comes to humanity with the gift of Grace and justification. Justification as an event occurs in the pilgrimage of life, it is therefore the beginning of a new existence. This is what St. Paul will call 'life in the Spirit'.

On the Cross, Jesus' death has become a turning point in the work of redemption; and his resurrection has all to do with giving all creation a 'New Life'. Jesus, the Risen Lord, is raised by the Spirit and filled with this same Spirit. He is the New Adam, source of the eschatological new life of God for all human beings (1 Co 15: 45).

All human life has its source in Jesus; it is a life that flows from the Father, the life-giving principle. This principle will be later on called '*Force Vitale*'. Through his glorified body, the Risen Lord has become the life giving spirit. He is over flowing with the supernatural and immortal life of God the Father.

⁶⁵ See Nyamiti, "The Mass as Divine and Ancestral Encounter Between the Living and the Dead," Op. Cit., 33.

3.4 The Holy Spirit – force vitale

A man called Nicodemus came to Jesus by night to have a conversation with him, seeking to understand the ultimate purpose of human life. “How can a man be saved,” was his throbbing question. Jesus told him that he had to be born anew; to be born of water and Spirit (Jn 3: 3-5). We can say from the episode that the Holy Spirit through whom human beings are brought to faith is associated with life. It generates life. This life is not a thing or a quality that stands on its own, but it flows from a life-giving relationship with a person who is Jesus, the New Life, and through him with the Father.⁶⁶

In the Creed we profess, ‘I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life’. This Spirit is given by the Father, through the Son, and operates in the Christians through the ministry of the Church. The Bible refers to the Holy Spirit as “the vital principle of human being, the seat of its sensations, intellectual operations and attitudes of will... that designates life as given and authorized by God.”⁶⁷

The traditional African universe is composed of several spirits.⁶⁸ The spirits are in a status between human beings and God. Africans sometimes talk of spirits of the water, the spirits of the river or lake, tree spirits, or even mountain spirits, snake spirits, e.t.c.⁶⁹

The Religious outlook of spirit or spirits in Africa has a similarity with the Holy Spirit, namely, the quality of being supernatural and immaterial; but there is obviously more to the Holy Spirit as the third person in the Trinity. In Traditional Africa, the spirit(s) is an impersonal principle characterised by the weakness and frailty of human beings and can be manipulated by human power and intelligence to cause harm or havoc to other human beings.

⁶⁶ James McPolin, The New Testament Message 6, John (Delaware: Michael Glazier, inc, 1984), 85.

⁶⁷ Kasper, Op. Cit., 201.

⁶⁸ Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion, Op. Cit., 70.

⁶⁹ Magesa, Op. Cit., 56.

The Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, is creative and is the life giving power of God. This Spirit fills the earth and holds all things together (Wis 1: 7; cf 7: 22 –8:1).

There are spirits of ancestors and those who have been in that state since the beginning of creation. From both groups we have bad (potentially dangerous to humankind) and good spirits. Ontologically, the spirits are intermediaries (between God and human beings) who present sacrifices, offerings and prayers to God. Therefore, they have an active and powerful relationship with human beings.

The spirits are divided into two; they are either nature or human spirits. Nature spirits refer to sky or earth spirits while the human spirits refer to ghosts or the living dead spirits. The African understanding of these spirits is that they can be either good or bad.

A Belgium missionary, Placide Tempels in his *Bantu Philosophy*⁷⁰, claimed that the wisdom of Bantu based the philosophy of vital force is accepted by everyone, it is not subjected to criticism for it is taken by the whole community as the imperishable truth. That the vital force united the Bantu so much that he found difficulties to evangelise them fully. We shall use this vital force or the *force vitale* concept of Placide Tempels to understand the centrality of life in Africa. this is because he had also concluded that each being in proportion to its mode of being possesses life. Since God is a supreme being he is said to have life-force.⁷¹ He is the great force who possesses the fullness of life and generates life force in all other beings. Each being is in relation with other beings. This means that the *force vitale* in one being is influenced by the other beings.

⁷⁰ The book appeared for the first time in Flemish in 1945 and was translated into French and into English in 1959. The book became a kind a classic for classic for missionaries and later for Africa clergymen when the talk of African Theology began to take shape. See Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris, 1959), 75.

⁷¹ Oboriji, Op. Cit., 77.

Life is a sacred power; "life is so central that it must be characterised as sacred."⁷² Life, the vital force, unites the whole clan, tribe and community. It is the inner principle that promotes growth; thus has to be cherished by all. God is the source of all life, the fullness of life. He is the creator, giver of life, strength and promoter of life. God the Creator endows all creatures with his own force of life.⁷³

The names given to God by the diverse African peoples reveal that God is the fullness of life; he needs no support outside himself. He is permanent and unchanging.⁷⁴ God is then seen as the dispenser of life. All life is actually a participation in God. Life comes down to the living through a hierarchy, where God is the source, down to the founding fathers of the clans

(Ancestors), the heroes, deceased elders, dead family members and then the various earthly powers. According to Laurenti Magesa, human participation and solidarity, not only with God, the ancestors and other spirits, but also with other elements of creation, are essential aspects of the enhancement of life.⁷⁵

All life and power, i.e., life as existence, flows from God. It follows, therefore, that by right of their primogeniture and proximity to God by death, God has granted the ancestors a qualitatively more life force over their descendants.⁷⁶

Life is celebrated in many African cultures. We celebrate birth, initiation (into the society and into adulthood), marriage and death. Initiation is directed towards marriage (family life) and procreation. These are considered as rites of passage. The centrality of life is impressed upon

⁷² Bujo, *Op. Cit.*, 19.

⁷³ Magesa, *Op. Cit.*, 50.

⁷⁴ Bujo, *Op. Cit.*, 18.

⁷⁵ Magesa, *Op. Cit.*, 55.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

those who go through the process of initiation (rite of passage). Thus, in marriage, they will be able to transmit vital force; preserve the vital force.⁷⁷

Life has its fountain in the community. The more one participates in the community the more life he/she has. Therefore, the African concept of life is vitalistic and communitarian with the aspects of hierarchy and participation. The hierarchy of life i.e. life in creature, has to do with the life from the source to the recipients- particular individuals. The participatory life is the life that all share: life as participation.

Life is participation in God, but is always mediated. Living members have an inalienable responsibility for promoting and prolonging the life of the community in all its aspects.⁷⁸ Life is to be prolonged by good actions. These deeds are life giving and contribute to the communities' common vital force. Bad actions diminish the common vital force.

The Holy Spirit is life in the sense that it circulates in the community. It is the 'new' life in the people; it is the gift of the Father – Creator and Great Ancestor, through the Son – Proto-Ancestor and our Brother. The mysterious reality behind life is thus the Holy Spirit; and life is therefore equated to the Holy Spirit, not by identification, but by analogy. This Holy Spirit transmits divine life of grace that is God Himself. "It is the gravitational pull of love, the upward attraction that resists the downward pull and brings all things to their completion in God."⁷⁹

3.5 Challenges of the Trinity to the African Family

For the African people, as it has been noted above, the family has a much wider connotation than the nuclear family concept. It includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts,

⁷⁷ Ibid., 110.

⁷⁸ Cf. Bujo, 22.

⁷⁹ Kasper, *Op. Cit.*, 202.

brothers and sisters – who may as well have their own children and other immediate relatives. The family is an anthropological symbolism. “Family symbolism has the advantage of underlining inter-subjective relationships and so emphasising the tri-personal nature of God.”⁸⁰ The family has a natural appeal to the African people. All the factors mentioned in the previous chapter show the significance of the family in Africa. With the image of the Trinity, we stress the bond of communion, inclusiveness and the warmth of love among extended relationship.

The immanent Trinity is the Trinity for itself (as the three persons relate to one another in eternity). There is an eternal internal cohesion, unity and communion in the Trinity. The Trinity is one divinity and a mutual relationship binding the persons to one another. The immanent Trinity, therefore, challenges the African family to strive to live a life in communion and love.

The economic Trinity, the three persons as they relate to us (and implicitly to one another) in the history of salvation, has more value to the African people, more especially with the comparative model that is used in this paper.

The interactions and relationships within the African family are inclusive (unborn, living and departed), implying that it (African family) provides the grounds for fellowship, communion, remembrance, respect and hospitality. The dead are, on the other hand, seen as those who solidify and in very a mysterious way bind the family together.⁸¹

The Trinity, “down to earth”, the economic, should challenge the family to holiness, where God is the head. The family should be the place for mutual help where the values of charity and love are planted and nourished.

⁸⁰ Boff, *Op. Cit.*, 105.

⁸¹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, *Op. Cit.*, 107.

The three persons of the Trinity are not only distinct from one another; they are also intimately related to one another. So must family members live, not as independent units, but as one body, open to the neighbour and the world in relationship.

For Karl Rahner, the Holy Trinity must have a connection with human beings. The Trinity is a mystery of salvation, otherwise it would never have been revealed.⁸² In the presentation of the basic axiom, “the Economic Trinity is the Immanent Trinity” and “the Immanent Trinity is the Economic Trinity”,⁸³ Rahner intends to show that the Trinity is our salvation. He so focuses on the economic Trinity as to identify the immanent Trinity with it. This daring step can be represented well by the family: the Trinity-here-incarnate. The family is to be for all humanity the channel to return to ‘true’ humanity. It is a free gift that is aimed at transforming society.

The family is to become the instrument of God. God communicates himself to us as he speaks to us through his son and in the Spirit.⁸⁴ The family is then to become the amplifier of the message that God has for all humanity.

3.6 A Synthesis

What we have above is a related reality. The Father, the Proto-Ancestor and our Elder Brother (Son), and Life (Holy Spirit), are all related as one. The Father relates with “the Proto-Ancestor”, Jesus, who is also Son in a deep and personal way. Life as that which flows is a vital principle; it is a witness of the love that exists between the two, Father and the Proto-Ancestor.

⁸² Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Burns and Oates/ Herder and Herder, 1990), 21.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁴ Thompson John, *Modern Trinitarian perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 26.

God the Father is the source or fountainhead of the entire Trinity; he is the Father of the African people (kinship) – in the proper sense of the word, a 'Parent'. Jesus is the Proto-Ancestor, sent by the Father so that Africans become the adopted descendants through Him. Jesus' incarnation and redemption brings New Life – Grace, therefore making the immanent Trinity economic. As a consequence, our comparative model, the African family, falls right in place.

The Holy Spirit, the giver of life, is a gift from the Father through the Son (Proto-Ancestor). It is the mutual love between the Father and the Proto-Ancestor, with the Father as the source. The Spirit of God is hence seen at work throughout the whole of creation, bringing true life.

CHAPTER IV

4.0 CONCLUSION

What is the pastoral value of our theology?

If what we have done is just mere speculative theology, then it is of no pastoral worth. This comparative model of the Trinity is intended to help appreciate more the African family and society, by looking at its many values. Our approach should contribute something in the area of marriage encounter and inculturation in general, which must in all its aspects invoke communion with the whole society.

An expression of the Trinitarian confession with the comparative model in terms that are meaningless for a society caught in the rapid flux would not answer to the demands of the family today, a family that is in search of and identity. The family today, with its economic hardships, aspiration for role models and domestic violence, must look up to the Trinitarian communion as the ideal “family”.

We had set out to seek the re-interpretation of the mystery of the Trinity in order to give it a permanent place in African belief system/s, to build a bridge of communication to a better understanding of the Trinity. It was also our task to discover a way of speaking and seeing the divine in Africa, especially in the family; to see how the conception and talk about God affects the way of living and relationships, hence authenticating the Christian prayer and witness. We used analogies: God the Father, Jesus the Proto-Ancestor and Life, for the three persons of the Trinity, which are found in the African family. Last, but not least, our aim was to expose some values of the African family. These values that we have identified can be

very helpful in the preparation of couples for marriage. It is our hope that all our objectives have been realized in this work.

This essay has revealed that the traditional African people valued the family as an important and indispensable institution in society. There are some traditional values that the present African family can learn or embrace for its prosperity today; these include solidarity, communion, hospitality and ancestral veneration.

It has been shown in this work that in making a Trinitarian confession, it will no longer be enough to simply take into account the traditions of the past. There are new questions and situations to address, as well as the aspiration of the individuals in the family. This means that there is an urgent need to orient efforts in function to the changes affecting society today. The Trinitarian communion, therefore, is a great challenge to the African family and society at large.

The existential approach to the Trinity is to be a critique to the African family, transforming it from the purely cultural level and bringing to it hope, while taking into account the mobility of the society in the present day. More than just a critique, it is supposed also to be a source of inspiration to the society and, specifically, to the family. For, as Leonardo Boff said, "the Trinity has to inspire communion, fellowship, equality of opportunity, and generosity for the individuals and society."⁸⁵

"The talk about God begins when God becomes present again among us. All this needs clarifications so that we can learn again how to talk about God to our fellow Africans".⁸⁶ There is need to be vigilant and active in the rethinking and proclamation of faith. The heavy

⁸⁵ Boff, Op. Cit., 151.

⁸⁶ Jean Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African* trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 161.

“heritage of the missionaries – obedient repeating of dogmatic formulas”⁸⁷ – has to be re-evaluated critically so as to move forward and be relevant to the context of Africa today. The belief has to stem from a mission that announces using the categories and concepts that are immediate to the people. This is the announcing of the Good News in a new way.

The sense of the family and belonging must be stressed, with the intention of creating a living and lasting bond between the living and the ancestors. The sense of community, participation and communion has to be developed. The Christian family prayer must also be Trinitarian, in that it has to be addressed to all the three persons of the Trinity, God the Father, Jesus the Proto-Ancestor (Son) and *force vitale* (Holy Spirit), each according to his place and role in salvation. The Father is the source of everything. He orders creation and our salvation (Jn 3: 16, 1 cor 8: 6). The Son – our Brother and Proto-Ancestor, the obedient one of the Father, brings all in faith to salvation. The Holy Spirit, *force vitale*, the inner principle of life, God’s love working in all who believe sets then in the way to eternal communion with the Father and the Proto-Ancestor (Son). The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit work in unison, undoubtedly, but each according to the unique place and role he has in intra-divine life.

The family must become an evangeliser; it must proclaim the gospel. It has to be a place where the word of God is shared and lived, the domestic Church, the community of faith, hope and charity. The African family, as a Comparative approach to the Trinity has to lead the way, thus offer a fashion of being Church where all resources are pulled together for the welfare of the community. The family has to be a place for dialogue; the dialogue of life.

At the opening of this section, we posed a question: what is the pastoral value of our theology? Which can otherwise be rephrased, what is the relevance of African theology? With this in mind, we wish to draw some lines of action, something that can be applied to the

⁸⁷ Ibid.

pastoral situation in Africa. The family is the starting point, followed by the small Christian community, the parish, the diocese and, finally, the national level.

The talk about Trinity has to start in the family, parents and their children must feel that they participate in the divine communion. The roles and responsibilities of each member must be seen not as a show-off but as a means to fulfilling the needs and aspirations of the family. The joy or the sorrow of a member must be shared by all, very genuinely.

Small Christian communities are formed usually by the family communities (neighbours) and the African Synod notes that “the Church as Family cannot reach her full potential as Church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster closer human relationships.”⁸⁸ In these small Christian communities the image of the Trinity, developed in the family and in chapter three, can be used. These images (God Our Father -the Father of Africans, Jesus Christ the Proto-ancestor and the Holy Spirit -life) have to be explained further stressing on how this particular Small Christian Community is sharing in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. At this level the ideas like sharing of responsibility, ancestral veneration (African Saints) dignity and respect of life ought to be advanced.

The Parish as a wider community of the faithful must for the purpose of making the Trinity real, be a sign of true communion – unity in diversity. It has to have programs that will show a great interest in the family, the structure that is a comparative approach to the Trinity. In it there should be a well-designed program for instruction of couples that incorporates the idea, that the ideal of the African family is the Holy Trinity. This program has to come to the diocese level if it has to make sense and uphold unity within the territory. The national level is more complex. But if the grass-roots are all involved in this modelling, then it is possible

⁸⁸ John Paul II, *Op. Cit.*, 69.

to come up with guidelines on this comparative model that may also become part of catechesis.

“Africa has got a lot to offer to the universal Church. Leading towards a fuller more balanced Christian theology for the church universally.”⁸⁹

“The Father is Love, the Son is Grace, and the Holy Spirit is the one who unites, O blessed Trinity” (An extract from The Divine Office, vol. 3, On the Solemnity of the Most Blessed Trinity).

⁸⁹ Gehman, R. J., Doing Christian Theology (Nairobi: Evangelical Publishing House, 1987), 23.

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Glory and honour be to
God in the unity of the
Trinity; To the Father
through the Son Jesus our
Proto-Ancestor in Life the
Holy Spirit.