Christianity as Fertility Religion: A Response to Prof. Bénézet Bujo
David T. Ngong
Assistant Professor of Religion and Theology
Stillman College
Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Abstract

Fertility religions are based on the birth, rebirth or rejuvenation of creation, especially the fertility of the land, which guarantees bountiful harvest and human fertility, ensuring the continuation of community. However, the emphasis on fertility, especially in Africa, has not only contributed in ruining marriages; it has also marginalized childless couples in church and community. This essay argues that there is an urgent pastoral need for the African church to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of fertility that goes beyond the biological and immanent view of the subject which I think dominates the understanding of marriage in both African Christianity and a significant document of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution of the Church, 46-50). It argues that Christianity is not a fertility religion that is immanent and anthropocentric but is rather a theocentric religion that is transcendent in character, especially as demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Key Words
Fertility, theology of inculturation, anthropocentric, theocentric, eschatology, ancestor

My original intention for this paper was to critique the immanent understanding of fertility that has come to characterize much of African Christianity. I intended to appropriate the debate on the difference between Baalism and Yahwism in twentieth century German biblical, and theological studies and the recent consensus on the perception of God as a fertile God, to call for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of fertility. This deeper and more nuanced understanding of fertility went beyond the biological and immanent view of the subject. This biological and immanent view of fertility, I think, dominates the understanding of marriage in both African Christianity and a significant document of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution of the Church, 46-50). It seems to me that this immanent understanding of fertility and fruitfulness has negatively affected married life in Africa, especially for those couples who have not been able to bear children. The point of the paper was to argue that there is a crying
need for a pastoral theology that engages infertile couples so that they may not be regarded by church and society as some kind of sub-human beings, as is currently the case in much of Africa. This was the goal of my paper before I was asked to respond to Prof. Bujo’s paper; it remains the goal of the paper after I read Prof. Bujo’s paper. However, I have tailored my thoughts to respond to some of the specific issues which Prof. Bujo has raised. The overall tenor of my paper will be to question Prof. Bujo’s methodological move, which is the theology of inculturation, in terms of the theological and practical viability of some of the positions taken in the paper. My conclusion is that an expansive and nuanced view of fertility is needed to supplement the view of marriage found in both Gaudium et Spes and the work of Prof. Bujo. I will begin by giving a brief description of fertility religion.

**A. What is Fertility Religion?**

Fertility religions are based on the birth, death, and rebirth or rejuvenation of creation. This process generates a cycle that especially ensures the fertility of the land, thus guaranteeing bountiful harvest. It also guarantees human fertility, thus ensuring the continuation of community. In fertility religions, the fertility of the land and human beings is critical and deity or deities are perceived as singularly concerned with this process. The critical nature of fertility as manifested in fertility religions is understandable: without the fertility of the land there will be no food to sustain the population and famine may lead to the extinction of the people. Also, without human fertility the people will go extinct. Seeing the gods or god as concerned with issues of fertility is therefore quite logical. The religion of the Canaanites, whose land the Israelites seized, has been described as a fertility religion because Baal, the Canaanite God, was pictured primarily as a God who ensured fertility. According to twentieth century German biblical studies, a significant difference between Canaanite religion and the religion of the Hebrew people was that
the Canaanite God was a fertility God while the God of the Hebrews was a God who was primarily interested in history. Thus, Baalism, the religion of the Canaanites, was pitted against Yahwism, the religion of Israel, by the portrayal of Baalism as a fertility religion and Yahwism as a historical religion. This distinction between Baalism and Yahwism no longer appears to be apposite because it is now acknowledged that the issue of fertility is critical to both Yahwism and Baalism. In fact, it has been pointed out that a robust doctrine of creation entails taking biblical notions of fertility seriously. As Walter Brueggemann points out, God, as creator, is the one who freely grants fertility to land, humans, and the rest of creation. The importance of fertility can be seen in the critical role births play in biblical religions. From the births of Ishmael and Isaac to the birth of Jesus the Christ, cardinal points in the story of God and creation are marked by births. The importance of birth to the Christian story partly accounts for why Vatican II discussed marriage within the context of procreation, as found in Gaudium et Spes. Vatican II also uses language that is reminiscent of procreation when it discusses celibacy in terms of “spiritual fruitfulness” in Presbyterorum Ordinis (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 16). Prof. Bujo’s thoughts on the centrality of procreation in the married life also conceptualize Christianity, especially Christianity in Africa, as a fertility religion.

The questions about perceiving Christianity as a fertility religion raised in this paper are therefore not based on the notion that the Christian faith does not or should not prize fertility. From a theological perspective, fertility is critical to a creative God. From a practical perspective, human beings and other animals would perish if the land is not fertile and if children are not born. The questions raised here are rather based on how the Christian faith should be conceptualized as a fertility religion. Is fertility decreed by church and society or is it the gift of a

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transcendent God in whom we live and move and have our being? In other words, does human relationship with God ultimately transcend fertility? Is fertility ultimately theocentric or should it be conceived anthropocentrically, as seems to be the case with the work of Prof. Bujo? What role should fertility, especially human fertility, play in Christian life? We begin answering these questions by looking at the context in which the question of human fertility has often been discussed – the context of the married life. Prof. Bujo’s view of marriage in Africa has been influential in the discussion of marriage in Africa.

B. Crafting an African theology of marriage

Prof. Bujo situates his theology of marriage within the context of the development of the theology of inculturation in Africa authorized by Vatican II in *Ad Gentes*. This theology, as is now well known, endeavored to give an African color or face to Christianity, as the titles of some important reflections on the subject, such as that of Mulago and Tshibangu, suggest.  

Prof. Bujo has been one of the leading voices in this endeavor. The importance of ensuring that the Christian faith speaks to the questions which Africans are asking cannot be overemphasized. One of these issues is, of course, marriage.

The issue of the complexity of African marriages has been raised by Prof. Adrian Hastings in his book *African Catholicism*. This book called for the regularizing of African Catholic marriages. The notion of regularizing African Catholic marriages speaks to one of the central

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concerns of Prof. Bujo’s, namely, that Christianity has delegitimized elements of African marriages. Leaving aside the thorny issue of polygamy, even monogamous marriages still suffer the spite of the church which despises carefully constituted marriages in African societies. Prof. Bujo’s work holds tremendous insights into how the church may approach marriage in Africa. His call that marriage in Africa be viewed as a communal process rather than a punctiliar event is quite apposite. To this very eloquent call, I would like to state that one of the problems with the punctiliar view of marriage is not mainly that it is Western; rather, the main problem is that it is deeply elitist and casts the lot of the church with the elite rather than with the common people. In my experience, the punctiliar view of marriage has been the preserve of the rich who can afford enough resources to foot the bills that accompany church weddings. Growing up in the village in Cameroon, I never saw a wedding ceremony in the church because the church was made up of poor people who cannot afford the cost of getting married in the church. Men usually followed the process of getting married in the village and brought their wives home without much fanfare. Protestant churches in my village accepted these marriages but the Roman Catholic Church called it irregular. I knew of Christians who were refused the Eucharist because the church deemed their marriages irregular. Such state of affairs demonstrates a continuous devaluation of salutary elements of African cultures in spite of the call by Ad Gentes that Africans glorify God within the context of their cultures. Prof. Bujo’s work thus carries continued urgency.

My central contention with Prof. Bujo’s work is the anthropological framework that undergirds his view of African marriage.

C. Marriage, Anthropological and Theological Eschatologies

Prof. Bujo’s broader framework of marriage is located in African anthropology. This is an anthropology in which human well-being is found in community that includes, first, the living,
the dead, and the yet to be born and, second, in the interaction among what he calls the monad, the dyad, and the triad, making up the plurality of the community. In this context, marriage is meant to ensure the continuity of this community because the life of each group or individual in the community is intertwined with the other. First, the life of the dead or what John Mbiti calls the living-dead is not placed only in a theological context in which the dead are expected to spend eternity with God; rather, the life of the dead is also sustained through anamnesis, the memory accorded them by the living. Thus, the dead have a vested interest in seeing to it that the living continue to procreate so that there would continue to be members of the community who would keep the memory of the dead alive. It is only when the living foster the memory of the dead that the immortality of the dead is ensured. On the other hand, for the living to have a sense of holistic well-being, they need to maintain cordial relations with the dead.

In this framework, marriage serves as the context in which both the physical and spiritual futures of the community are preserved. A tremendous and even awesome task is thus placed on the living – they are responsible for bringing forth the yet to be born so as to ensure the survival of the dead and the living. In this task, they are of course not alone – the living-dead bestows spiritual blessings that ensure fertility. As Prof. Bujo points out “the living members contribute to the happiness of the deceased, but, in return, the latter provide them with all the necessary gifts for their daily life. Sickness, hunger, barrenness and so on don’t occur in the community when the ancestors are not forgotten” (see his paper). One may wonder whether the sickness, hunger, and death found in many African societies are due to the fact that the ancestors have been forgotten. The answer to this question would at best be ambiguous. That question aside, in Prof. Bujo’s eschatology, there is a mixture of what one might call African ancestral eschatology with a Christian theological anthropology. The accent is placed on African ancestral eschatology
in which the life of the dead depend not so much on God as it does on the living. In short, this eschatology says that our future in the spiritual world is in our own hands.

If the argument were that humans need to procreate because the survival of human community depends on it, that would be less controversial. The difficulty here is not that human survival depends on procreation; it is rather that the survival of the life of the dead depends on such procreation. And here is where the difficulty lies – what becomes of those married or even unmarried people who do not procreate? African societies have generally shunned those people and Prof. Bujo’s anamnestic ancestral eschatology provides no respite for these people. Prof. Bujo’s sentiments are echoed by one of the most influential scholars in African Traditional Religions, John Mbiti, when he writes:

marriage and procreation in African communities are a unity: without procreation marriage is incomplete. . . . A person who, therefore, has no descendants quenches the fire of life, and becomes forever dead since his line of physical continuation is blocked if he does not get married and bear children. . . . Unfortunate, therefore, is the man or woman who has nobody to ‘remember’ him (her), after physical death. To lack someone close who keeps the departed in their personal immortality is the worst misfortune and punishment that any person could suffer. To die without getting married and without children is to be completely cut off from the human society, to become disconnected, to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind.\(^5\)

This ancestral eschatology has caused tremendous grief to countless men and women in Africa, one of whom is a foremost African theologian, the Ghanaian, Mercy Amba Oduyoye. In a very revealing article, she grieves the spite with which she was treated by her in-laws because she was unable to conceive a child. In spite of the fact that she has raised many of the children in her

extended family to adulthood, she was still treated with scorn because she could not have her own child. She writes of awkward conversations with people who simply assumed that as a married woman she should have children. She reports of embracing biblical stories of women and men who had children even when they were past their childbearing age. She writes of how Christian men who were friends of her husband’s proposed to make her pregnant if her husband was the problem (that is, was infertile). She underwent both traditional and Western medical treatment, some of them in very humiliating circumstances, before finally accepting her lot as an infertile woman destined to be remembered in other ways. If she were the one who was infertile, such was ground for her husband to get married to a second wife so as to have a child by her. Oduyoye even talks of men, some of them pastors, who had children out of wedlock if their wife could not have a child. Because these men were not allowed to marry a second wife because of their position in the church, they preferred to have children out of wedlock. She mused how the marital vow and the injunction against adultery do not mean much if there aren’t children in some African Christian marriages. In this context, the important issue is not so much faithfulness and companionship in marriage but the ability to procreate. In all her struggles, both church and society in Nigeria and Ghana, the two African countries where she lives and works, hardly had a soothing word for her.

Oduyoye’s forlornness in the African Christian scene has led her to symbolically disavow her marital status by opting to reclaim her maiden name. This symbolic move was preceded by her request to divorce her husband given that she could not be the kind of wife society wanted her to be. A successful marriage, according to this African anthropological eschatology, is one teaming with children. Oduyoye’s marital experience as a childless wife made her to feel that

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nothing else mattered in this African universe. Thus, she symbolically disavowed her marital status by reclaiming her maiden name, Amba Ewudziwa, the name she was given on the eighth day after she was born. This is how, she says, she “would like to come home to herself” as a childless wife, a “woman alone,” in the West African space. Oduyoye’s disavowal of her marital status because it offers her no fulfillment as a childless wife is a stinging indictment of the African anthropological eschatology and the African church that uncritically espouses it. In addition to symbolically disavowing her marital status as a coping mechanism against the “child factor” in the West African space, Oduyoye also draws from her Christian spirituality characterized by a deep prayer life and the recognition of various spiritual gifts. She then makes the following recommendation for African theology:

For me childlessness in the West African space has been a challenge – to my womanhood, my humanity, and my faith. . . . It is for the church to acknowledge and raise up the diversity of God’s gifts and to celebrate all the ways of bringing forth life. My concern is for a theology of procreation that responds to this challenge, a theology and eschatology that will speak to both those who reproduce themselves biologically and those who do not, a theology that embraces forms of fruitfulness, biological and beyond.

African theology has, however, not heeded her call for there is a dearth of theological treatment of infertility in African theology. The ancestral eschatology that is based on procreation has rather been carried over into Pentecostal churches in which infertility is interpreted as a curse that needs to be broken. Infertile couples are made to see infertility as an evil which can only be relieved through having their own children. Even adoption, they are told,

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is no substitute for having their own children. Gaudium et Spes does not relieve this grief when it states that “[b]y its very nature the institution of marriage and married love are ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory.” This being the case, it does not sound quite revolutionary when the same document later states that “[e]ven in cases where despite the intense desire of the spouses there are no children, marriage still retains its character of being a whole manner and communion of life and preserves its value and indissolubility.” This concession, while rooted in the theology of creation, fits into the narrative of African ancestral eschatology and worsens the plight of the childless in Africa. In all this, a central question that keeps coming to mind is: where is the theology in this eschatology? Does the human journey into divine life ultimately depend on human beings? Is African ancestral eschatology a sufficient Christian theological eschatology? Should it not rather serve as the raw material from which a viable African Christian theological eschatology is crafted?

A related context in which Prof. Bujo’s understanding of African marriage is situated is that of the relation among the monad, the dyad, and the triad that leads to plurality. The monad is the individual person who is an incomplete version of the notion of ubuntu (I am because you are; you are because I am). Since the monad is the incomplete version of the notion of ubuntu, part of the being of the monad is found by finding the other, particularly the other of the opposite sex. In this case, part of the being of the male is found by finding a female and vice versa. By finding each other, the two unite to produce a third, the triad. It is the various connections among the monad, the dyad and the triad that form the multitude of the community. The main point here is that a person is incomplete if they remain a monad or single. They are still incomplete even if they become a dyad by finding each other of the opposite sex but without conceiving a triad.

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10 Gaudium et Spes, 48, 50.
Completion comes only if they procreate and thus form a triad that gives rise to the plurality of community. While the emphasis on community which this conception entails has much to be said for it, it is still not clear how individuality works within this framework. It is clear from this conception that an individual is an incomplete being who can only find wholeness in being immersed in a community that encompasses the physical and the spiritual. Since this is the case, is there any place for individuality that may invite dissent with this community? Can an individual be allowed to hold views that are ultimately radically incompatible with that of their community? This appears to be impossible as Prof. Bujo has intimated elsewhere that in the African communal context, the individual “has no individual conscience but that of the community.” ¹¹ Does this view not necessarily demand the kind of consensus that came to characterize the dictatorship of many African countries?

A related question has to do with how Prof. Bujo conceptualizes celibacy. Since it is the case that monads are by nature incomplete versions of the ubuntu, are celibates therefore subhuman? This question becomes urgent when we consider that celibates are not only those who will never become a dyad by meeting members of the opposite sex, they are also those who have taken vows to never procreate and so will never form a triad, unless they break their vows. The question becomes even more urgent when we take into consideration the fact of African ancestral eschatology. Who will remember these people when they die, given that they have no offspring to keep alive their memory? A trajectory that has developed in this regard is for the community as a whole to make ancestors of celibates, as it happened in Cameroon in the case of the late African theologian, Prof. Jean-Marc Éla who died in 2008. Considering that he was a Roman Catholic priest who did not have offspring to remember him and that he was perceived as

someone who had lived a life that made significant contributions to his people, his village community made him an ancestor. This shows that it is possible to make someone an ancestor in African anthropological eschatology even if that person does not have a child. However, this method of making someone an ancestor is still centered on human achievement, albeit an achievement different from biological procreation. This eschatology, notwithstanding, is still significantly different from a Christian theological eschatology. It makes no place for grace.

A Christian theological eschatology is an eschatology that is not based on procreation, notwithstanding the claim in 1Timothy 2:15 that women will be saved through procreation. Christian eschatology is based on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and how this singular event draws wayward human beings into the triune divine life. Taking the life of Jesus Christ seriously, it becomes clear that our life with God finally does not rest on the offspring we have but on our single-minded desire to do the will of God. Jesus Christ himself did not have any children and we remember him today not because of his offspring but because he draws us into the life of the triune God. In fact, some African theologians such as Charles Nyamity and Professor Bujo have even described Jesus Christ as the ancestor.\(^\text{12}\) That Jesus is the proto-ancestor of some Africans is clearly not based on any claim that these Africans are his biological offspring. It is rather a declaration that these Africans have come to accept Jesus Christ as their savior. Accepting a childless person as an ancestor and savior of Africans should serve to redefine what it means to be an ancestor in African Christian theology because Jesus Christ does not fit the ordinary definition of an ancestor in Africa. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ should therefore transform the anthropological eschatology of ATRs that seem to inform some forms of African theology today to a theocentric eschatology that takes up the human into

divine life, valorizing the biological in the spiritual life of God. This view of salvation is one that takes up the material into divine life so that all material forms of life are transformed in God. In this scheme of things, having children is a good thing but it is ultimately not decisive for the Christian life with God. As Christians, our goal is to participate, eternally, in the life of God rather than to become ancestors. Becoming an ancestor is a worthy goal that needs to be pursued by Africans who cherish that goal. However, African Christians should be enabled to come to the realization that becoming an ancestor is not the critical issue in a Christian eschatology; participating eternally in divine life is the goal. In this case, the continuation of life is not based on human memory but on divine memory. And divine memory is not based on the number of offspring people have.

A final issue which Prof. Bujo’s paper raises is that of homosexuality. Homosexuality, as Prof. Bujo sees it, is effectively ruled out by the nature of ubuntu. Homosexuals, like infertile people, kill the creative impulse that generates the community of both the living and the dead. Homosexuals, in the African scheme of things, will never form a dyad because they will never meet the opposite sex. Because they will never form a dyad, it follows that they will also never form a triad and a plurality. Thus, homosexuality is rejected in Africa not on any biblical or theological ground but on the ground of African anthropology which finds its ultimate end in ancestral eschatology. In spite of this rejection of homosexuality, Prof. Bujo acknowledges that there have been homosexuals in Africa. One must hasten to add that there continue to be homosexuals in Africa. Thus, the pressing question that needs to be raised is what to do with these people? The widespread homophobia in much of Africa is well known. In some cases, homosexuals have been killed and some have sought asylum in foreign lands. Is this the fate which African Christian theologians expect to befall homosexuals in our continent? Does
portraying homosexuals as enemies of a holistic life not put their lives in danger even more? Why would African theologians want to be remembered as people who have taken up the cudgel against homosexuals? More importantly, where is God in all this?

D. Conclusion

This essay has argued that although situating Christian marriage in the African cultural context may have some value, it is also very problematic in other respects. The African anthropological or ancestral eschatological context poses difficulty because human worth and memory is finally not located in the life of God but rather in human biological fertility. From a Christian theological perspective, humans are created in the image of God and their final destiny is to find their ultimate rest in God. This does not depend on biological procreation but rather on many different ways of participating in divine creativity. While Christianity can and should clearly be seen as a fertility religion because the Christian God is a fertile God, it is theologically very problematic to situate human worth and ultimate destiny mainly within the context of biological procreation. For African cultures that seem to prize human holistic well-being, situating human well-being mainly within the context of procreation causes grief to many. Any culture that inscribes such grief in its central salvific narrative needs to be rethought. The African church is still to construct a viable theology that shows that human worth and ultimate destiny rests in divine life rather than in human procreation.

Address:

David T. Ngong,
12319 Huntington Village Dr.
Northport, AL 35475
USA
Tel. 205-248-3224
Email: Dngong@stillman.edu