



MOYA CHRONICLES

A PUBLICATION OF MISSIO AFRICANUS



A PLEA FOR A ROBUST AFRICAN THEOLOGY OF THE SPIRIT

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Welcome to the third year of *Moya Chronicles*. We are ecstatic about the many great things that God has in store for us this year. We trust that *Moya Chronicles* will continue to seek to be an intellectually-stimulating weekly devotional that informs, energises, and inspires African Christians as they go about following Christ and serving in his mission every week. Of course, we are far away from reaching that goal, but we trust that it is only a matter of time before we are able to do that.

Over the past two years, we have learned quite a lot about what we are trying to do with these pieces of stories and reflections that seek to capture the work of the Spirit among African Christians, both in the continent and in the diaspora. We have continued to believe that the explosion of Christianity in Africa is a clear sign that God's Spirit is at work in the continent. The thousands of people who come to the faith every day across the continent only do so because the *moya* of God moves them. It is this *moya* that can bring life to people who should, otherwise, be forgotten and then move them wherever it wants. I had a teacher who talked about the Spirit as the Holy Gust of God, a strong and abrupt wind from heaven that continuously disrupts human life and seeks to rearrange it according to God's desires. Of course, the gust disperses us, carrying us across the seas and over the air, to the places God would have us serve. It is in this sense that we are confident that the Spirit that is at work in Africa is also sustaining us in the diaspora. Indeed, the Spirit is not only at work among Africans, God is bringing us into the

worldwide fellowship of the Spirit where we all get to exchange the gifts God has given us for one another.

It is, indeed, our conviction that a part of that gift that the African church brings to the table is an understanding of the work of the Spirit that is shaped by African cultural sensibilities. In this edition of *Moya Chronicles* and, indeed, for this year, we focus on this gift of an African enthusiastic theology as a way of making a contribution to the worldwide Body of Christ. This chronicle comes as a response to the question I get the most in class: ***“Why do we have to stop believing in the spirit-world when we become Christians and start following a God who is Spirit?”*** In answering this question, I encourage African Christians to push this question as a way of Africanising Christianity. Paying attention to the Spirit helps us with several gains. I argue here that attempting to articulate a theology of the Spirit helps us make use of the gifts of our culture and, therefore, makes our Christianity more faithful to the context of Africa.

Faithfulness to the African Context

Back in the 1970s, in a paper entitled, “Theological Impotence,” John Mbiti wrote a fictitious yet heartbreaking story of a young African PhD graduate majoring in theology who returns home after many years of study abroad. His western education exposed him to many western theologians, albeit at the expense of his cultural heritage and Africanness. At his welcome party, an incident happened.

Suddenly there is a shriek. Someone has fallen to the ground. It is his older sister, now a married woman with six children and still going strong. He rushes to her. People make room for him and watch him. "Let's take her to the hospital," he calls urgently. They are stunned. He becomes quiet. They all look at him bending over her. Why doesn't somebody respond to his advice? Finally, a schoolboy says, "Sir, the nearest hospital is fifty miles away, and there are few buses that go there." Someone else says, "She is possessed. Hospitals will not cure her!" The chief says to him, "You have been studying theology overseas for ten years. Now help your sister. She is troubled by the spirit of her great aunt." He looks around. Slowly he goes to get Bultmann, looks at the index, finds what he wants, and reads again about spirit possession in the New Testament. Of course, he gets his answer: Bultmann has demythologized it. He insists that his sister is not possessed. The people shout, "Help your sister; she is possessed!" He shouts back, "But Bultmann has demythologized demon possession!"

This unfortunate scenario happens so often in all parts of Africa. The problem, as Mbiti points out, is that a theology has been passed on to us that is "impotent" and does not know what to do with the real-life implications of the activities of the spirits in communities. Pentecostal scholars often argue that there is a pneumatological hiatus in the West, and this has found its way to Africa. One such scholar, Paul Pomerville, suggests that "The excessive impact of western culture on the theology brought by the missionary to non-western cultures resulted in an extremely naturalistic, rationalistic, and abstract-oriented theological product being introduced into supernaturalistic, intuitive and concrete oriented societies." For example, the concept of power is at the centre of African traditional religious thought and the spirit—of God, the gods, or the ancestors—was a tangible reality. How remote, how intellectual, how powerless seems to be the God and the Spirit the missionaries preach about, or the Westerners show in their lives. As one leader once expressed it in a conversation with the missionary, "you have held back the Spirit!"

Of course, the Spirit is active in the Bible. The New Testament is not possible without the Spirit's direct involvement among human beings. Right from the incarnation where the Spirit overshadows Mary to the blind Apostle John on the island of Patmos writing letters to the seven churches of Revelation, the Spirit is, in real and tangible ways, interacting with human beings. In Jesus' words, worship must be done in Spirit and truth. It is clear from the Epistles that the whole of the faith life is supposed to be lived in the Spirit. In addition, Luke's emphasis on the activity of the Spirit in

Acts suggests an openly active anthropomorphic Spirit at work in the church. The charismatic gifts were to be used without apology, shame, or fear. Yet, and this is the crucial point, Jesus, while filled with the Holy Spirit, had to contend with other spirits. This worldview of the New Testament is, in so many ways, similar to that of many African cultures. We need not let go of this understanding of life when we begin to follow Christ. If anything, we need to follow Christ well aware that we have the Supreme Spirit of God in us, but there are many other spirits in the universe and they, too, seek to affect our lives. The student in Mbiti's story above went overseas for education and came back brainwashed. The implications of all this are still with us today and will shape our thinking for generations to come.

As African theology takes its own context seriously, a new understanding of God, the Spirit, mission and the church must emerge. This is of extreme significance because Christianity in contemporary Africa has reached a unique context that is both rural, generally agrarian, and economically under-resourced. As such, Christianity in Africa has to identify with a new constituency, so to speak, one that has been limitedly touched by the Enlightenment. Many of them find Christianity spiritually impoverishing though, of course, this is not correct. Yet, it is among such spirit-world-believing people that Christianity is thriving in Africa. It is precisely among these people that theology ought to be articulated. For this reason, we cannot do theology without paying attention to the Spirit and to the spirit-world. Understanding the work of the Spirit in this manner guides our ecclesiology to reflect biblical images of church life. And to this end, we hope that *Moya Chronicles* will continue to contribute. Happy Reading!



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