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Unpacking Nasimiyu Wasike’s Christological Journey

Esther Mombo & Heleen Joziassse

Introduction

Anne Nasimiyu Wasike (1949-2018) was born in Kitale (Western Kenya) in 1949 and as a Catholic theologian, throughout her life she taught and embodied the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ who cared for the poor and the destitute, the good news for both men and women. This foundation is explicated in the following quote:

The God of Scripture is a living God who is the giver of life. God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed and joins in their struggle for liberation from forces that rob them of their claim to life and liberty. Christianity has to affirm God's tender love for the poor and to develop an ethic for the option for the poor as springing from the heart of Christian faith. (Nasimiyu, 2001:50)

In 1982 she earned a Master of Arts in Religious education from the Gannon University in Erie, Pennsylvania and in 1986 she completed her PhD and became a Doctor of Philosophy in Systematic Theology from Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with a dissertation entitled *Vatican II: The Problem of Inculturation*. She was a champion of Inculturation Theology, bringing African Christian Theology from the margins to the center of Christian theological discourse. She also was an active member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). From 1994 she was associate professor and from 2002 full professor of Systematic and Moral Theology at Kenyatta University, where she also worked as a Dean of students. At the same time, she served as General Superior of the Religious Institute of Little Sisters of St. Francis in Uganda from 1992 to 1998 and again from 2010 to 2016. Anne Nasimiyu was also one of the founding members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and contributed to the inauguration of the Circle in Trinity College, Legon in 1989 (Oduyoye, et al, 1990). As regional coordinator of the Circle in East Africa, she put

efforts in mentoring young scholars to research and publish in the area of African women's theologies. Her publications covered a wide range of topics, e.g. Theology of the Church, Liberation Theology, Inculturation of the Sacraments, African Women's Theology, African Religion, Mariology, Belief Systems in Kenya and Christian Response to Contemporary issues.

The theme of inculturation coupled to the liberation from oppression of all marginalized people, especially women in Africa, appears to be the red thread throughout her theological work. Her publications attest to a rootedness in the lives of grassroots women, as well as a pastoral concern for women and their suffering in church and society. Nasimiyu gave for instance a feminist theological critique on polygyny, arguing that the Christian message of equal sharing in humanity of men and women, and the accompanying radical vision of human mutuality, reciprocity and cooperation, contradicts and rejects polygamy (Nasimiyu, 1992b). Between 1993 and 2001 she was a member of the Executive Committee of the Franciscans International at the United Nations. In this capacity she spoke in 2001 to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session about the effects of HIV/AIDS on Women and Children in Kenya (United Nations, 2001).

Her activism and solidarity with poor and marginalized women brought her eventually in conflict with the Vatican. From 2004 she was censured by the Roman Catholic Church for her alleged views on abortion. After renunciation of these views, she was eventually reappointed as Superior General of the Little Sisters (Western, 2006). Sr. Nasimiyu's sudden death was described in the obituary as the outcome of a *short illness*. This made another influential Kenyan woman theologian and former colleague at Kenyatta University, Theresia Hinga, to suspire: "... her sudden passing reminded me that the possibility of fair, just, affordable and efficacious healthcare as human right is still a pipe dream for many in Kenya, Africa and indeed globally" (Hinga, 2018). Her plight for justice and mutuality is exemplified in the way Nasimiyu contributed to the construction of African women's Christologies. In what follows we will highlight the method she advanced and the sources she used, to give the contours of what we call a "lived Christology" of African women.

Contours of an African women's Christology

Christology is the core of Christian faith. Nasimiyu defines African women's Christologies as Christologies of liberation, focusing on the experiences of women, and of inculturation of the gospel (Nasimiyu, 2005:107). Hence, characteristic for Nasimiyu's work is the merger of the liberation and inculturation paradigms, whereby she regards the incarnation of God in Jesus as the paradigm for both inculturation and liberation. She states: "By Jesus' redemptive incarnation, the humanity of Jesus is united to every other human being, granting everyone dignity, which mandates justice for all" (Nasimiyu, 2005:112). Further on she writes: "Clearly, incarnation or inculturation of the gospel has not taken place sufficiently, which creates the urgently call for new approaches to evangelism and catechization in Africa" (Nasimiyu, 2005:112). According to Nasimiyu liberation follows from "inculturation or incarnation of the gospel"; she seems to equate inculturation with incarnation and argues:

In following the way of Jesus, we are called to care and to be committed to the suffering neighbour, to critique and call for changes of the systems which cause suffering, and to endeavour to uncover the logic that is used to keep people in oppressive situations (Nasimiyu, 2005:112).

Nasimiyu, schooled in Western Roman Catholic tradition and making this tradition relevant to the African context and culture, gives fresh interpretations of Systematic theological themes, for instance of the Trinity:

The historical Jesus is manifested as the oppressed one whose earthly existence was tied up with the oppressed of the land. Jesus' sole reason for historical existence was binding the wounds of the afflicted, setting the captives free, giving sight to the blind, preaching the good news to the poor etc. (Lk 4:18-22). The historical Jesus is the life of the Trinity in words, actions and attitudes (Nasimiyu, 2005:105).

The question of Mark 8:29 "And you, who do you say that I am?" is central in African women's Christologies, while the answers women are given, provide a source for formulating Christologies. Fundamental for Nasimiyu is that African Women's Christologies are not primarily found in publications (Nasimiyu, 2005:125); rather, she argues that women live their lives in union with God and "their theology is not one which is

written and articulated but one which is lived and practiced in everyday activities and experiences” (Nasimiyu, 2005:130). Therefore, Nasimiyu ultimately locates Christology in the lives of women. Hence, since incarnation is the key, the Christology from the perspective of African women is an embodied Christology.

Method of constructing women’s Christologies

African women theologians, likewise Prof. Anne Nasimiyu Wasike, employed and further developed the feminist theological methodology as construed in Western feminist theology. This methodology, based on “the hermeneutical circle”, consists of three steps: The first step is attending to the experiences of patriarchy and androcentrism by listening attentively to one’s own experience and that of other women and/or subjugated men. However, this listening is not solely targeting women’s experiences of oppression. Elsewhere Nasimiyu writes regarding the dialogue between Western and African theology:

African theological reflections must begin by critically pondering the experience of the marginalized, their struggles, their dreams, and their visions. The African theologians must also analyze the colonial experience in order to root their theological reflection into the painful memory of the colonized. These indeed are the historical realities of our people that continue to influence the present. Mutuality means entering into the others' experience and trying to journey together to bring about transformation (Nasimiyu, 2001:48).

The second step in this hermeneutical circle consists of bringing these experiences into dialogue with a feminist reading of the Bible and/or other Christian texts, while the third step contains a development of strategies for transformative action or praxis that are liberating (Mwaura, 2015). In line with this methodology Nasimiyu mapped the context of African women (Nasimiyu, 2005:125). In her description she highlights the great variety and diversity of life experiences of women in Africa:

(...) the life styles vary according to poor or rich, single or married, with no children or with ten children, with husband present or absent, participating in domestic or commercial career, traditional or modern, rural or urban, at peace or at war, of social chaos or order, with a family

system that is patriarchal or matriarchal, with opportunities for education and self-direction or not (Nasimiyu, 1989:124).

However, based on her experiences in Kenya and Uganda, she considers the struggle for the bare necessities of life a common denominator. Women in rural sectors, with or without education, work tremendously hard while their main concerns are physical needs: "food, water, clothing, shelter, medicine for themselves and their children, and school fees" (Nasimiyu, 2005:124). These challenges are situated in marital/family relations, amidst poverty and poverty related issues. Hence, limited education, lack of school fees, unemployment, gender-based violence, and lack of health/well-being, fashion women's experiences with Jesus.

Nasimiyu also describes the cultural hardships faced by African women, such as suffering from restrictive taboos and an inferior position. According to Nasimiyu, women are primarily looked upon as child bearers and servers, and when a woman does not fulfill these roles, either because of bareness or because of death of a child, she is "often cruelly oppressed" (Nasimiyu, 2005:124). She signals that woman have learned to endure and accept these conditions as part of life. Throughout her writings, Nasimiyu describes the experiences of women as being second class citizens and second-rate members of the church, who are denied human dignity, equality, and mutuality in relations. In conclusion: the lived experience of women in Kenya are characterized by survival and oppression.

Sources of Christology rooted in Bible and tradition

The next step in formulating a contextually relevant Christology for women is to bring the experiences of Kenyan women in conversation with the Bible. In line with the next step in the liberation theology methodology, Nasimiyu brings the lived experiences of women in conversation with the Bible and identifies two crucial themes for Christology, e.g., the incarnation of Jesus and Jesus' interaction with women. Nasimiyu considers incarnation to be the paradigm for both inculturation and liberation from socio-political, cultural, and gendered oppression. In her interpretation of the New Testament parables, she highlights Jesus' concern for women - for their being and well-being - ,

and his restoration of the true worth and dignity of women in all spheres of life. Jesus acts counter-culturally by giving women equal status to men, more so, by erasing all lines of superiority and inferiority (Nasimiyu, 2005:127). Jesus used both men and women's (cultural) everyday experiences to explain and teach his message of liberation and equal worth. The gospel stories show how Jesus acted counter-culturally for instance by feeding the five thousand or washing the feet of his disciples (Nasimiyu, 1989:127).

Part of Nasimiyu's publications on Christology consists of a critique of the European, male-centered Christologies that were brought to Africa through the missionary movement. In line with other first-generation feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Nasimiyu holds that whereas Jesus taught equality between men and women, later Christian teachings tended to underscore male dominance. The 'new doctrine' of Jesus about equality between women and men, was gradually changed in the history of the Church proclaiming that the human nature of women is different from men's nature. Moreso, the introduction of the symbol of Logos and other references for defining Christ became androcentric, while in theological thinking in relation to God, male qualities were over-emphasized: man was created in the image of God, woman created in the image of man. Another distortion was the teaching that through man a woman finds her salvation. Nasimiyu indirectly critiques the Roman Catholic doctrine that considered Jesus' maleness (rather than his humanity) to be an essential aspect of the incarnation (Nasimiyu, 1989:129). Consequently, she challenges the implication that only biologically male persons can represent Jesus Christ in the priesthood. According to her, the fundamental equality and equal dignity of women and men is anchored in creation and Christology: both men and women were created in the image of God and both are in need of, and have a share in the redemption by Christ. Nasimiyu finally observes that in the tradition of the church Christology became predominantly philosophical and abstract, at the expense of attention to the existential Jesus of the Gospels. In relation to the missionary teachings concerning Christology, Nasimiyu writes that in the missionary teachings these distortions in Christology became even more pronounced:

In some African minds this Jesus was imaged as an imperialist, racist, cultural and religious colonialist, who was hierarchical and patriarchal in his relationship with people. The Euro-American theological debates were brought wholesale to Africa (Nasimiyu, 2005:103).

Four Christological models and imageries

Characteristic for the Christology of Nasimiyu is that she locates these "reflections" of Jesus Christ not primarily in literature, neither in one cultural model, as is a common approach in African inculturation theology. Contrary to the dominant Christological discourses of her time, Nasimiyu locates her Christology in the daily lives, in the lived experiences of women, and in the lived experiences with Jesus. Therefore, before constructing contextual models or advancing certain imageries, Nasimiyu conducts some interviews with individual women to map women's experience with Jesus (Nasimiyu, 1989:125). She first fashions her Christology based on a small exploration of the faith experiences of six women, answering the question "Who is Jesus to you". The interviewees named several images: "Jesus is my strength, savior, hope, model, helper, teacher, my everything and my God." "Jesus is kind and generous and shares in my sorrows when I am in trouble" (Nasimiyu, 1989:125). Her conclusion is that women use the church tradition and the teachings from catechism as their reference. Their Christologies mirror a holistic view of life, whereas Jesus affects their whole life. Hence Christology is not only involving the spiritual realm, but also the psychological and material. Moreover, women in this small scale interview hold that Jesus saves them from witches and evil powers. Finally, in the midst of suffering and hardships, Jesus gives women courage and the hope that everything will be restored to wholeness in Jesus Christ (Nasimiyu, 1989:126).

Based on these interviews and in line with Biblical accounts, Nasimiyu constructs four Christological models accompanied by different imageries, which respond to these varied experiences of women. With this proposal she attempts to re-dress what she considers to be distorted images of Jesus, since these models, apart from Christ the liberator, appear to be contextual interpretations of traditional models in Systematic Theology. The underlying premise which is likewise voiced by other African women theologians is that: "This God, the Christ, is the one who

takes on the conditions of the African woman - conditions of weakness, misery, injustice and oppression” (Nasimiyu, 1989:130) Similarly, the Cameroonian Thérèse Souga wrote: “In the light of Christ, if Jesus is the God who has become weakness in our context, in his identity as God-man, Jesus takes on the condition of the African woman” (Souga, 1988:28).

The first model she proposes is the *eschatological model* in which Christ (as the New Human Being) is depicted as one who through suffering, death, and resurrection, restores the God-human relation, and thus opens a future for a new humanity. Nasimiyu emphasizes Jesus Christ as the victorious conqueror of all evil spiritual forces, and the revealer of God’s ultimate victory over death. While death is defined as the absence of relation and community, Jesus Christ is the redeemer of relationships. This model has important implication for the position of women:

In His suffering Christ took on the conditions of the African woman and conditions of the whole of humanity, and in His resurrection the African woman is called to participate in the *restoration of harmony, equality and inclusiveness* in all human relationships in the family, society and Church (Nasimiyu, 2005:131).

The second model, the *anthropological model* is developed in most detail, while this model appears to be most influential in the development of African women’s Christologies (Oduyoye, 2001:61). In this model Nasimiyu articulates the images of Jesus as Nurturer, Protector and Mother, referring to old Christian traditions in which Jesus is depicted as a pelican feeding her children. She demonstrates that the gospels bear numerous accounts of Jesus’ protecting, life giving, and nurturing acts, and she argues that: “In his own life Jesus clearly lived a well-defined feminine “lifestyle” (Nasimiyu, 2005:108). Moreso, she reframes Jesus’ death on the cross as a form of childbirth; through immense pain, life was enhanced and new life envisioned. Through this act, both men and women are called to exhibit the qualities of a mother; a lifestyle of loving your neighbor, putting others first, and giving life (Nasimiyu, 2005:108).

In this anthropological model Nasimiyu again underscores the intertwinement of divine life and daily life. Women participate in the divine life by giving birth, maintaining, and nurturing life. Notably, Nasimiyu emphasizes that Jesus does not reduce women solely to their role as “child bearers” or nurturers of life. Instead, Jesus recognizes

women as responsible persons and as full participants in the church, restoring "the Church and humanity to the initial inclusive, holistic and mutual relationships between women and men" (Nasimiyu, 1989:131). Jesus suffers in women, men and children in Africa and he works in and through them to give birth to new human conditions. Both men and women are called to give birth to new and better human relationships.

Nasimiyu qualifies the nurturing role more generally as "promoting life" and she applies the model of Jesus as nurturer not only to relations in family and church, but also to the society at large. Promoting life is demanded in the face of growing dependency and poverty due to the neo-colonial economic trade policies. Being nurturers of life means that African women and men together seek their true African identity; shaking off the burden of neo-colonialism and foreign and alien ideologies of democracy. Becoming nurturers of life implies thus the creating an African democracy in which African peoples, – their wisdom, their cultural values and religious heritage – are respected (Nasimiyu, 2005:110). Nurturing is also required amidst the HIV/AIDS pandemic: Nasimiyu identifies polygyny and African rituals, e.g. widow cleansing and wife inheritance, as some of the main causes of the spread of HIV (Nasimiyu, 2005:109). Moreover, nurturing and promoting life is needed in view of the civil wars, ethnic cleansing, natural disasters and environmental degradation. Here, Christ is the restorer who through suffering, death, and resurrection, opens a future for a new humanity: Jesus Christ is the victorious conqueror of all evil spiritual forces and reveals God's ultimate victory over death. Whereas death ultimately means the absence of relation and community, Jesus Christ opens a future for redeemed relationship. Simultaneously, Nasimiyu suggests the model of Jesus as mother as a critique of male dominated authority and power, e.g. criticizing a system where a patriarchal spirit and doctrine - exercising dominant power - thrives. She argues that in the face of multiple injustices, the nurturer-model displays a spirituality of justice (Nasimiyu, 2005:117).

In the third model, the *liberation model*, the image of Jesus Christ as liberator is core. Nasimiyu holds that all women and men are called upon to name personal and structural ills, and to identify with the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, towards the liberation of everybody.

Following Jesus implies naming the evils, the personal ills and the structural ills, and being enabled to identify with the disadvantaged in the society. Nasimiyu herself identifies numerous evils in the immediate context of women, e.g. domestic violence, the accumulation of wealth in the face of abject poverty, HIV/AIDS, and the marginalization of women in the church. She describes the oppression of women as follows:

These [marginalized people in Kenya] include petty traders who walk the city streets to find customers for their fruits and vegetables and are often harassed by the police; girls who are forced to drop out of school because their parents cannot afford to pay school fees; women who are forced to enter into polygamous unions because of economic reasons and cultural beliefs; and traditional rural women who are faced with all types of hardships and oppression. These women are always poor and hungry because they have to produce enough food to feed their families and sell the surplus in order to educate their children (Nasimiyu, 2005:132).

Other areas where liberation of Jesus is required are cultural injustices such as polygamy, female circumcision, and bride wealth. According to Nasimiyu, marginalized African women should not accept their hardships and pain as their fate - an attitude of acquiescence – which is often promoted for women in the churches. Rather, Nasimiyu emphasizes that God's struggle for a new world is reflected in the struggle of women. The struggle of the African woman becomes God's struggle; Christ suffers in her and works in her to give birth to new and better human relationships.

In her perception Christ the liberator affects all parts of life including human relationship. In the gospel stories Jesus portrays that women and men have equal spiritual potential and they are called to the same spiritual life. There are no virtues demanded exclusively of women or of men (Nasimiyu, 2005:127). For Nasimiyu this also implies that both men and women are equal partners in marriage, both deserve mutual respect and responsibility in building and maintaining the relationship. Concurrently, she sharply critiques polygamy:

The original will of God for humanity was equal partnership and mutual relationship between women and men – polygamy is a distortion and came about as a human response to social, economic, religious and personal needs and was based on distorted human relationships between women and men (Nasimiyu, 1992b:116)

The fourth model is the *cosmological model*, with the imagery of Christ as Healer. Through his liberating power, Jesus restores individual people, societies, and the universe to wholeness. Here she refers to the publication *Hearing and Knowing* of Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Christology from the perspective of women can be designated by the title: "Jesus the Savior" (Oduyoye, 2000:103). Nasimiyu asserts that Jesus saves to wholeness; he brought and continues to bring physical and spiritual healing to people. Men and women are called to be a witness of Jesus' restoration through active participation in healing, casting out demons, and creating a new world. Hence, healing is holistic.

Evaluation:

Nasimiyu's Christology as *lived* Christology

The influence of Sr. Anne Nasimiyu Wasike as a pioneering female liberation theologian in the Roman Catholic Church in Kenya and her influence on the development of African Women's Theology cannot and should not be underestimated. She was among the first Kenyan women who got a PhD in Theology and who taught at universities in Kenya and in the Minority World, developing a relevant, African, inculturated and liberating theology. Together with Teresia Hinga (1955-2023), another Kenyan pioneer in African Feminist Theology, she was a founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle). Nasimiyu's publications focus on unraveling the structures of women's oppression in society, culture, church and theology, and promoting liberation. At the same time, Nasimiyu was very active in the church and in the promotion of justice on national and international level in. Hence, she contributed to the development of an African theology at the university, while her theological reflection was firmly rooted in the lived experiences of women. Nasimiyu formulated a Christology which Heleen Joziassse coined as a "*lived Christology*", a Christology in which experiences of women with Jesus Christ in their day to day life, result in new contextual interpretations of the being and meaning of Jesus as the Christ; the one who saves, gives life, liberates and transforms (Joziassse, 2020). These African women's Christologies are inculturated Christologies, rooted in the Biblical witness and the Christian tradition.

Moreover, the lived Christology as proposed by Nasimiyu is a holistic Christology, away from hierarchical dualisms of spiritual and material/physical, natural and spiritual, man/woman. The same holistic approach and the rootedness of theology in the lived experiences, Nasimiyu also discerned in the African initiated churches:

The Euro-American churches in Africa could learn from these African initiated churches in terms of contextualization of the gospel, in self-reliance, and in creative methods of propagating the Christian faith. It is true that African initiated churches lack theological clarity and structures. We have to realize that theirs is a practical, lived theology rather than a speculative theology. Their theology arises from the context of their existential and experiential reality. God speaks through their own medium and experience and affirms their uniqueness (Nasimiyu, 2001:52).

Hence, on hindsight Nasimiyu developed the method of doing theology of the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians, starting from the varied lived faith experience of women “at the grassroots” and her own experience, while at the same time correcting a male, metaphysical approach to Christology. Her approach is further elaborated by other African women theologians such as Loreen Maseno (Maseno, 2014).

Nasimiyu’s main contribution and prospects for future work

It can be argued that by writing a “lived Christology” in 1989 Sr. Nasimiyu was her time well ahead. The empirical turn in Religious Studies and Systematic Theology which in the Minority World is perceived as a 21st Century phenomenon, can be located earlier from the 1980s onward in African Theology. In the lived Christologies of women, the diversity in faith experiences in connection to the various and particular lived experiences of women, results in a multiplicity of imageries and Christological expressions. Nasimiyu’s Christology implies a systematizing of reflections concerning the being and meaning of Jesus Christ and at the same time navigates between systematization and the messiness of everyday life experience. Hence, she proposes a considerable variety of imageries, described and structured in four unifying Christological models.

As a theologian Nasimiyu explicitly advocates for the image of Jesus as nurturer/mother and she applies this image to different categories, e.g. Socio-cultural, economic and political. Her christological interpretation of the nurturing and mothering roles of Jesus is a further qualification of the relation between Jesus and believers and at the same time a "humanization of women". Her application of these "mothering" qualities to all people in all realms of life, is acknowledged by other African women theologians as a significant contribution. The critique of Pemberton that these models reflect the stereotype role modeling and are ultimately not liberating for women, seems to be an example of Western white feminist hegemonic interpretation. We concur with the remarks of Martha Frederiks that the significance of African Women's Theologies primarily should be evaluated by African women theologians (Frederiks, 2007:195).

Loreen Maseno, while building on the methodology of Nasimiyu, critiques her for not taking the diversity and particularity of women's experiences into account (Maseno, 2014:235). Maseno argues that the category "women" is essentialized; women are depicted as a single group, and the intersection of multiple oppressions of women is not taken into account (Maseno, 2014:237). She holds that often feminist theological reflections don't deal with particular women's experiences as "a concrete place for the marginal theological voice which defies the closure of universal categorizations" (Maseno, 2014:237). Therefore, Maseno in her research of Christologies of Kenyan women, explicitly maps the lived experiences and the lived faith experiences of Abanyole widows, as specific group. She uses in-depth interviews and life-stories of widows to map their Christologies. In her research she concludes to several new metaphors with Jesus as "breath" as the fundamental experience in relation to Jesus: "In general, Jesus Christ to widows is substance, essence, both something and everything, everywhere and in all things" (Maseno, 2013:206). Other metaphors which Maseno constructs or identifies are Jesus Christ as "skin" (offering protection), "medicine" (healing), Jesus Christ as helper and provider and Jesus as friend. The new "unbounded" imageries provide indeed a deeper insight in the lived Christologies of Kenyan women, although the similarities with earlier formulated women's Christologies by Nasimiyu and Hinga are evident.

CONCLUSION

The importance of the Christology of Nasimiyu is that her Christology provides a critique on the oppression of women in culture and religion. This critique and the demand for justice and mutuality is rooted in the Bible and the liberating praxis of Jesus. Nasimiyu's Christology challenges the one-sided or singular models, common in inculturation Christologies in Africa. She introduced a new methodology for constructing African women's Christologies based on the lived experiences of women in Church and society in Kenya. In her Christology which is rooted in the Bible and the Christian tradition, she depicts Jesus as the one who supports both men and women, who transforms and gives life to the whole of humanity. Her lived Christologies stand out in contextual approach and meaning, with Jesus Christ as holistic liberator and the giver of life in fullness.

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