

My God is enkAi: A Reflection of Vernacular African Theology

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Abstract: In the thirty-two years since Lamin Sanneh published *Translating the Message* (Orbis Books, 1989), there has been a growing awareness of the importance of vernacular languages in Christian life and practice. But it is often still assumed that Christian theologizing is not legitimate unless it is in a European language. In much of Africa, theological education only takes place in the languages of the colonizers—English, French, and Portuguese. This can result in African churches that are ill-equipped to speak relevantly to African situations, as leaders are trained to read, teach, worship, and pray in a foreign language, neglecting their own. Authentic African Christianity requires theologizing in local African languages and invoking God in the names of God in those languages. Though (ironically?) written in English, this paper examines what elements of a vernacular theology might sound like for the Maasai and Samburu peoples of East Africa, exploring the Maa and Sampur names for God and discovering insights for World Christianity as well.

Keywords: Vernacular Theology, Maasai, Intercultural Hermeneutics, Enkai

AS THE STARTING POINT OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY, “GOD HAS A VERNACULAR NAME.”¹

Vernacular names for God not only tell us something of a people’s conception(s) of God, but often reveal aspects of God’s character. Jesus tells us that “every expert in the law who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his treasure what is new and old” (Matthew 13:52, NET). When we know the Scriptures well, we bring treasures old in the faith to share as new treasures in Christ with our people. As Kwame Bediako reminds us, “Mother tongues and new idioms are crucial for gaining fresh insights into the doctrine of Christ” (1998, 111; see also Bediako 1995b). Historically Africans have “responded to Christian preaching by recognizing God in their ‘pre-Christian’ past and in their vernacular languages, even where there was no active cult of the Being named” (Walls 1996, 187). The task of African theology in particular is “to speak relevantly

¹ Walls 2016, 691.

to the contemporary African” (Tutu 1975, 369). This it can only do when “African Christians cease to regard Christianity as a ‘white’ religion and see it as part of them” (Waliggo 1975, 425). As long as our theologizing is limited to foreign languages, we are handicapped. This is why Nigerian theologian E. Bôlaji Idowu referred to the vernacular as *the key to the soul* (1969a, 24) and insisted “that the urgent predicament of the Church in Africa today is that of the apparent foreignness of Christianity” (1969b, 13). Likewise, Stephen Mutuku Sesi (2009, 32) observes that “it is impossible to contextualize the gospel using a foreign language.” Indeed, the wide Christian adoption of the vernacular was no doubt a contributing factor to Christianity’s lasting survival in Egypt and Ethiopia just as its ultimate disappearance from North Africa and Nubia was hastened by the lack of a similar degree of vernacularization (see Shenk 1993; Bowers 1985). Thus when we know and use our vernacular language and culture well, we bring out treasures old in our culture to share as new treasures in Christ with the Church at large, which is a gift to World Christianity. In this essay, I will examine traditional Maasai and Samburu names for God, exploring their potential both for enriching the theology of World Christianity and for enabling Maasai and Samburu Christians to develop a deeper understanding of their own faith as authentically Christian and authentically African.

“WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT WE BELIEVE UNLESS WE SAY IT IN OUR OWN LANGUAGE.” —

JEAN MARC ÉLA (1988, 164)

Lamin Sanneh rightly insists that “[T]he Bible in the tongue of the people is a theological first step in the divine instruction of the human race” (2012, 35; see also Sanneh 1989 and Sanneh 2009). This necessarily includes the use of vernacular names for God. Such naming enables African followers of Jesus to develop “a doctrine of God that enriches the present Christian understanding of God in Africa” (Muzorewa 2000, 9). Among the Maasai and Samburu, closely related Nilotic peoples living in Kenya and Tanzania, that name (in the Maa language and related dialects) is **enkÁi** (properly **enkÁí**).² There are a few dialectic differences in pronunciation: **ɛŋkÁí** in Siria Maa (spoken in the Loitáí Hills) and Parakuyu / Barakuyu Maa (spoken primarily in Tanzania); **ŋkÁí** in Chamus Maa and Sampur (*aka* Samburu); and **ɛŋÁí** is sometimes heard in Kenya (Payne and Ole-Kotikash, 2008, s.v. **enk-Áí**; Mol 1996, 3–4; Vossen 1998, 103; *Samburu Dictionary* 2019, 171) and is

² I am adopting the convention of capitalizing the root rather than the gender prefix, thus **enkÁí** rather than **Enkái**. This orthographical convention is also used by a number of scholars (e.g., Frankl 1995, 203–204). I am using the adapted IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) notation of Doris Payne throughout (Payne and Ole-Kotikash, 2005, 2008), with the exception of retaining the convention of “ch” as in *church*, in keeping with the practice of most Maasai writers. In addition to having lived and worked among Maasai communities for fourteen years, I am especially indebted to both Payne and Ole-Kotikash’s *Maa Dictionary* and to the published works of Frans Mol (esp. Mol 1996, Mol 1978, and Mol 1995).

common in Tanzania (where it is usually written as “Engai”; Nkesela 2020, 24). It is written as **Enkai** in the Maa Bible (BSM-1991; BSM-2018), **Nkai** in the Samburu New Testament (2019),³ and often rendered as “Ngai” or “engai” by outsiders. Interestingly, the Bantu Agikũyũ, Chagga, and Kamba all use “Ngai” as the customary word for God, adapted from the Maa **enkÁí** as a loanword (Adam 1997, 35; Hastings 1989, 104; Frankl 1995, 203–204). (Note that *Agikũyũ* refers to the people and *Gikũyũ* to their language; both are customarily anglicized as “Kikuyu,” the Swahili name of the Gikũyũ language.) Of course, among Maasai Christians, “the traditional concepts of God” have been sufficiently Christianized that the name **Enkai** refers both to God as historically known by the traditional Maasai community and also to “the God of Christian worship” (Kombo 2007, 10) as known by Maasai believers. **enkÁí** is a single and unique God, a heavenly entity, for both communities and is not conceptualized as one deity among many. Rather the traditional Maasai demonstrate “la croyance en un Dieu celeste unique” (“the belief in a single heavenly God,” my translation; Neckebrouck 2002, 74). It is worth noting that the plural form of **enkÁí**, **inkáitin**, is all but unknown; I have never heard it and have only seen it as a translation of “gods” in the Maa Bible translations. Here I will focus on how the traditional Maasai and Samburu understandings of **enkÁí** can enrich a Christian theology which is both biblical and vernacular.

“I WILL SEND RAIN FOR YOUR LAND IN ITS SEASON, THE AUTUMN AND THE SPRING RAINS.”
(DEUTERONOMY 11:14, NET)

Traditionally semi-nomadic pastoralists, the Maasai and Samburu would migrate with their herds based on the patterns of rain. Rain is, of course, crucial to life. As God gives rain, often in response to the prayers of people, sometimes **enkÁí** is used eponymously for moderate to heavy rains (Stoks 1999–2000, 86; Payne and Ole-Kotikash, s.v. enk-ái; Mol 1996, s.v. enk-ái). This intimate connection between rain and the concept of God is common to many African peoples (Sawyer 1968, 25; Kombo 2007, 182–183; Mbiti 1970, 129–139; Kwesi 1984, 52). There is, however, no ontological confusion in the Maasai imagination between **enkÁí** (*God*) who sends **enkÁí** (*rain*; though the generic term is **enchán**). Linguist Doris L. Payne notes, “all my consultants reject identifying ‘God,’ ‘the sky,’ and ‘rain’ as the same thing, much as an English speaker would reject identifying ‘nonurban countryside’ and ‘nation’ as being the same thing, even though the word country is used for both concepts” (2003, 199). This is similar to usage by other Nilotic groups such as the Karamonjong, Turkana,

³ While linguists recognize Sampur as a dialect of Maa, and while it is generally mutually intelligible with other dialects, it has sufficiently diverged from “standard Maa” (usually as represented by the Purko dialect) to warrant its own Bible translation; Purko and Sampur have a 70% linguistic overlap.

and Kipsigis/Kalenjin (Knighton 1999, 121; Fish and Fish 1996, 4–5). Broadly, **enkÁí** can be understood as “She Who Brings Rain” (Hodgson 2005, 19–67). Sometimes the Maasai will say “*eshá enkÁí*,” *God is raining*, or even “**enkÁí esha enkÁí**,” *God is raining rain* (cp. Assefa and Belachew 2017, 323).

EnkÁí is also traditionally associated with mountains and rivers. A culturally important mountain along the Tanzanian-Kenyan border is called **Oldóinyó lé nkÁí**, *the Mountain of God*; a somewhat active volcano. Beth E. Elness-Hanson discusses a Maasai comparison of this mountain with Mt Sinai in Exodus and Deuteronomy (2017, 117). The water provided by rivers provide life for both humans and livestock. When the rains are plentiful, the grass on which the livestock of the Maasai depend grows lush and green. Thus, another name of God is **Noompees**, “she of the growing grasses” (Voshaar 1998, 137). During the dry seasons, the Maasai herds retreat to the highland pastures, which keep them alive until the rains return. Perhaps this association of rivers and mountains with the upholding of life is why the Maasai conception of God is related to these geographical features. At any rate, **enkÁí** is recognized as a giver of gifts, especially of children, cows, rain, milk, and life (see Hodgson 2005, 26–27). Etymologically **enkÁí** may mean “She who gives life.”⁴

This idea of the giving of gifts is retained in the connotation of the Kikuyu *Ngai*, who is recognized as “the divider of gifts among peoples” (Lonsdale 2002, 168; Kibicho 1975, 372). Given the long relationship between the (Bantu) Agikũyũ and the (Nilotic) Maasai (see Lawren 1968), including the Gikũyũ adoption of the Maa name for God, it is worthwhile to consider the Agikũyũ conception of God, which is similar to that of the Maasai:

*God (Ngai) is the Supreme being, creator of everything. He has neither father nor mother, lives alone in the sky and cannot be seen by the human eye. Sometimes He comes down to the earth where He dwells in different places. His favourite residence, however, is Mt. Kenya (in Kikuyu: Kiri-nyaga = the mountain of light). Ngai must not be troubled for matters of secondary importance but He must be invoked by the patriarchal family in the crucial moments of the life of a person (birth, circumcision, marriage and death). Moreover, in moments of crisis, such as famine and epidemic, the whole tribe had to implore in a communal way the Supreme Being through specific rituals, led by the elders. ... Lastly, the interaction between the two worlds, visible and invisible, is completed by the belief that *the Spirit of God permeates the world of the living and lifeless beings and is [the] exclusive source of good* (Bottignole 1984, 34).⁵*

⁴ See Jan Voshaar’s long discussion on this etymology, paying especial heed to his footnotes (1998, 133–135; cp. Mol 1996, **enk-ái**; Payne and Ole-Kotikash 2008, **enk-ái**). Hans Stoks, on the other hand, suggests a derivation from **enkáré**, the Maa word for *water* (1990, 49).

⁵ Italics are those of the author. Note the use of the masculine proverb “He” reflects traditional English usage rather than Gikũyũ practice.

MOTHERLY FATHER OR FATHERLY MOTHER?

The use of the feminine pronoun here may bring as much consternation to some in the West as it will bring delight to others. Is God engendered? Yes and no. God Godself transcends human sexuality. Words for “God” are grammatically engendered in many (but not all) languages. In Hebrew, **אֱלֹהִים** (*El*) and **אֱלֹהִים** (*Elohim*) are grammatically masculine, even when referring to Ashtoreth, whom we know in English as “the goddess of the Sidonians” (1 Kgs 11:5, 33). In Greek, there is a masculine/feminine pair: *θεός/θεά* (*theós/theá*), god/goddess. In the NT and LXX, only the masculine form, *theós*, is used to refer to the God of Israel, who was revealed in Jesus, who was of course incarnate as a human male.

Due to the masculine gender of words for God and to God’s taking to Godself the name “Father” in both Jewish and Christian revelation, some have (wrongly) developed the idea that God is ontologically male. Much feminist theology is rooted in the need to reject this error. There is also, of course, much feminine imagery for God in the Bible, such as God comparing Godself to a nursing mother who cannot forget the infant at her breast (Isa 49:15) and Jesus comparing himself to a mother hen protecting her chicks (Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34). Certainly, there are masculine attributes of male humans and feminine attributes of female humans which can be traced to masculine and feminine attributes of God, as both male and female humans are created in God’s image. The Church would do well to remember that both fatherhood and motherhood are rooted in God. This can be done without falling into various mother-goddess heresies and idolatries. One striking example is the beautiful ancient Christian hymnody which sings of the believer “drinking pure spiritual milk from the breasts of Christ.” Even more striking are the Syriac *Odes of Solomon* 8.14 and especially 19.1–11, which speak of God the Father’s breasts being full of milk.

The Maa language does not have the engendered difficulties of contemporary English. In Maa, all nouns are grammatically engendered as masculine, feminine, or neuter. The gender is indicated by the articular prefix, which is always attached to the root in the absolute form. In the Maa word for “God,” the **enkÁi** of **enkÁi** is a feminine prefix; this is in common with other Nilotic languages such as Kipsigis and NgaTurkana (cp. Mojola 2018 and Mojola 2019). As a result, the Maasai have no difficulty ascribing feminine characteristics to God. Among the traditional Arusha Maasai of Tanzania, **enkÁi** is thought of as being “like a mother and a father” and women beseeching God for children sometimes address **enkÁi** as **Yieyíó áí**, “my Mother” (Wagner-Glenn 1992, 129). Yet the Maasai do not envision **enkÁi** / *God* as a sexualized goddess. Likewise, Christian Maasai can pray to **Papa enkÁi te shumata** (*Father God in heaven*) without envisioning a being with male genitalia. Indeed, when it is suggested to Maasai that **enkÁi** as Father is male or, given the grammatically feminine term, is female, the response is invariably either incomprehension of the question or incredulous laughter at

the thought. When the Maasai mock the idea of God having either a male or female sexuality, they are supported by no less than Gregory of Nazianzus, who in his day mocked those who drew from the assignation of a masculine pronoun to God (since θεός / *theos* is grammatically masculine) that God was therefore male (Nazianzen 1952; see Schmidt 1982). Instead, the Maasai recognize that God (enkÁí) is neither male nor female but has both masculine and feminine attributes. The seemingly contradictory need not be mutually exclusive. As African theologian Charles Nyamiti reminds us, “God, being Spirit, is neither male nor female, so that there can be no question of literally applying sexual characteristics to God” (1997, 62).

The Maasai are also untroubled by the question of whether it is more appropriate to refer to God as “he” or “she.” Indeed, for the Maasai “the question whether Enkai is He, God, or She, Goddess, or It, is a non-question” (Voshaar 1998, 136). Admittedly the grammatically masculine pronouns *he/him/his* are frequently applied to God in the Greek and Hebrew biblical texts. But again, the use of the grammatically masculine pronoun does not mean that God is inherently male. The Maa language has at least 221 pronouns, specifying not only 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person, number, and grammatical gender, but also such things as chronological or geographical distance from the speaker. But *ninyé* does duty for the *he*, *she*, and *it* of English. Thus in verses in the Maa translation of the Bible, the third person pronouns, whether personal or possessive, are not gender-specific. Maasai who think in Maa but speak in English, however, will quite comfortably refer to God as “she,” in grammatical agreement with the name enkÁí. Drawing on African traditions from all over the continent, Mercy Amba Oduyoye confirms that “the African mind contains an image of a motherly Father or a fatherly Mother as the Source of Being” (2002, 95). This is also a fitting description of the Maasai theological worldview; traditional Maasai recognize that enkÁí is “the source of everything” (Nkesela 2017, 40).

“IN THE BEGINNING, GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH.”

The Maa verb for *to begin* is <aitér> and the word for earth or land is enkóp. Thus when a Maasai hears Genesis 1:1, he or she is likely to think of another traditional name for enkÁí—Naitérukóp, the Beginner of the Earth.⁶ EnkÁí is thought to live

⁶ Some Maasai consider this to be a term applied to God, the equivalent of “Creator.” Other Maasai consider Naitérukóp, literally “she-who-begins the earth” (spelled as either Naiterukop or Naiterokop in secondary literature) not as enkÁí at all, but as the first human, the equivalent of “Adam” or perhaps rather of “Eve, the mother of all living.” See also Aud Talle’s discussion on different Maasai *Naiterukop* traditions (1998, 129–131).

I should note that Naitérukóp is emphatically not the goddess consort of the “great god Ngai,” in spite of popular western misconceptions, such as those embedded in the children’s story *The Lion’s Tail* by Douglas F. Davis, illustrated by Ronald Himler (New York: Atheneum,

in the sky (or heavens) and is known to have created the sky above and the earth below. So one name of **enkÁí** is **ɔlÁítóbirani**, the Maker or the Creator (derived from the verb **aitóbír**, *to make something, to create*). Sometimes this word **ɔlÁítóbirani** refers to traditional healers—the Maasai recognize that healing is something **enkÁí** does. Thus healers properly and essentially do the work of God. The more common term, however, for a traditional healer is **ɔlabáani**, a

Male healer or doctor for people or animals. He may perform surgery, may pray for people to get well, and may undo witchcraft. Traditionally he works from his home, waiting for those who come for treatment. He has acquired his position by virtue of effectively doing such work, and his work is life-long. (Payne and Ole-Kotikash, 2005, 2008; **ɔl-abáani**)

Likewise, an **enkabáani** is a

female healer or doctor; she may bless women in order to conceive and bear children. She works from her home, waiting for those who come for treatment. She is believed to have acquired her skills from God, and thus has a high position in society. (Payne and Ole-Kotikash, 2005, 2008; **enk-abáani**)

One Maasai Christian worship song is called “**ɔlAbáani, ɔlAnyórrani**.” The first verse praises God as “*Olabaani, Olanyorrani, Netonyorra pooki tung’ani otii enkop,*” *One-Who-Heals, One-Who-Loves, he has loved all the people who are on the earth* (Dan Crum 2000, 43).⁷ (Note also that **nétónyórrā** can be translated equally as “he loved” or as “she loved.” I have used “he” here in grammatical agreement with the two nouns, which are grammatically masculine.) In Maasai Christian contexts, God is referred to as **ɔlAbáani** in recognition of God’s being the healer of one’s soul in the sense of **ᵛᵛᵛ** (*nephesh*), body and heart. With this cultural background, we should not be surprised that Maasai Christians pray with New Testament expectations—they ask and expect to experience God’s answers, and sometimes those answers include miraculous healings. If you attend a Maasai women’s ministry conference, you are bound to hear many testimonies of healings—perhaps especially of healing from barrenness. Tellingly, women who have borne children are referred to as **entómónóni** (pl., **intómónók**)—literally, “one who has prayed well” to **enkÁí**. The proof that she has prayed well is obvious: **enkÁí** has opened the womb of the supplicant and given her a child. It is common throughout Africa, of course, for African Christianity to appropriate Jesus as “giver of life” and as “the healer” (Middleton 2009, 72; Oduyoye 1986, 44).

1980). Such views are clearly based on facile “study” by those who view the Maasai as an exotic curiosity without investing time to know the people, culture, and language.

⁷ Other names, such as **ɔlÁitóriani** (*Lord, Ruler*), **enkÁí, ɔlÁrámátani** (*One-who-tends/cares-for*), and **ɔlChekút** (*Shepherd*) are also frequently used in songs of Maasai Christian worship.

Because **enkÁí** answers prayers, one of the Maasai names for God is **Parsái**, “the one who is to be worshiped, prayed to, beseeched, sacrificed to” (Payne and Ole-Kotikash 2008, s.v. *parsái*).

“BELOVED, LET US LOVE ONE ANOTHER, FOR LOVE IS OF GOD AND EVERYONE WHO LOVES
IS BORN OF GOD AND KNOWS GOD, FOR GOD IS LOVE.”

Long before any missionary shared the Good News about Jesus (**Yesu** in Maa) with the Maasai, they were already speaking of **enkÁí** as **ɔlAnyórrani**, “the One Who Loves” (grammatically masculine). Two traditional Maasai proverbs explain the nature of love (the Maa noun is **enyórrátá**; the verb **anyórr**). “**Ébáiki nínyōr, nímirēt**” can be translated as “Perhaps you love him/her, yet you don’t help him/her.” Within human relationships, it is quite imaginable that we profess love for someone and yet there is no actual demonstration of love. We say “we love you” but don’t help the supposed beloved, and in fact we often harm instead (whether by sin of commission or sin of omission).

“**Mebáiki nínyōr, nímirēt**” means “It cannot happen that you love him/her yet you don’t help him/her.” Thus our actions (or inactions) will belie our words. “The proof is in the pudding,” as the traditional English proverb states. James writes “But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith without works and I will show you faith by my works” (2:18, NET). Paul teaches us that “Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom 13:10, NIV-1984). If we claim to love while either actively harming or refusing to assist, our actions prove that we do not in fact love. “**Mebáiki nínyōr, nímirēt.**” This proverb points to the strong Maasai value of relational reciprocity but also indicates that hate is a natural response to harm, not to love which does no harm; it is similar to the teaching that “we love because he first loved us.”

A third proverb similarly asserts **meétai tónyōrrai mááibá**—literally “it may not be [that] I loved you [with the result that] you hate me.” The Maasai find it improbable that someone truly loving another results in the beloved returning hate to the lover. *It is not possible to love in merely word or sentiment. Love helps those who are loved.* Because the Maasai know this instinctively, they know God as **ɔlAnyórrani**, the One Who Loves.

In the Greek idiom, the deep compassion that one feels for the suffering is expressed by the verb **σπλαγχνίζομαι** (*splanchnízomai*), “to be moved with compassion.” Etymologically, we could say that one is “moved in one’s guts [by compassion]”—the verb is derived from **σπλάγχνα** (*splánchna*), “guts, entrails.” This verb is used of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33) and is frequently used of Jesus (Matt; 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; Luke 7:13) and is used parabolically of God the Father by Jesus (Matt 18:27; Luke 15:20). The Maasai refer to

God as **enkÁí púsóshóke**, etymologically “blue-stomach God” but meaning “the Compassionate God.” This idiom for mercifulness or compassion, “blue-stomach” (**púsóshóke**), is *only* used of God, never of humans. If a person is compassionate, it is said that his or her stomach is “white” (**enk-óshóke**, *stomach*, refers to the internal organ, not to the skin of the abdomen). Thus our human compassion is but a pale shadow to the infinite compassion and mercy of **enkÁí**. It is because God is the *Blue-Stomach God of Compassion* that God is God who acts, responding mercifully to us when we call out to God.

“I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD.”

The Maasai also address **enkÁí** as **ɔlÁrámátani**, “the one who tends and cares.” Recall that the Maasai are pastoralists, raising livestock (cows, sheep, and goats). The best known Maa word (among outsiders) for shepherd is **olchekût**; in the Maasai and Samburu cultural contexts, “shepherd” refers to the care of cows and goats as well as sheep. But **ɔlÁrámátani** is a common word for a human shepherd as well; **enkárámátani** is a shepherdess or female caretaker. (Interestingly, even though the name **enkÁí** is grammatically feminine, God is spoken of as **ɔlÁrámátani**, in the masculine declension, rather than as **enkárámátani**, the feminine declension.) Thus when the Old Testament speaks of Yahweh as the “Shepherd of Israel” or when the Gospel speaks of **Yesu** (*Jesus*) as the “Good Shepherd” (either **ɔlÁrámátani sidai** or **olChekût sidai**) who takes care (the verb is **aramát**) of his sheep, this both makes immediate sense to the Maasai and also confirms what their own culture tells them about the character of God.

“UNLESS YAHWEH WATCHES OVER THE CITY, THE WATCHER KEEPS GUARD IN VAIN.”

An **ɔlarríponi** is a guard, a watchman, a custodian; it is the equivalent of the KiSwahili **asakari**. The Samburu refer to **enkÁí** as **ɔlArríponi**. The Samburu also name God as **Parsarúni**, “O our refuge.” Maasai Christians often conclude a testimony by saying **etorrípo enkÁí** (God protected) or a farewell greeting with **mikitorrípo Yesu** (may Jesus protect you). Does this not remind us of Old Testament passages such as Ps 121:4, where God is called **שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל** (Shomer Yisrael, the Guardian/Watcher of Israel)?

“... NO ONE CAN SAY, ‘JESUS IS LORD,’ EXCEPT BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.” (1 COR 12:3)

“... IF YOU CONFESS WITH YOUR MOUTH THAT JESUS IS LORD AND BELIEVE IN YOUR HEART THAT GOD RAISED HIM FROM THE DEAD, YOU WILL BE SAVED.” (ROM 10:9 NET)

Maasai and Samburu traditional society lacks kingship traditions, being more egalitarian than hierarchical in nature. Their society has been described as a democratic gerontocracy (Spencer 1965; see also Spencer 1998 and Spencer 2014). But Dorothy L. Hodgson has argued that patriarchy in Maasai society developed

largely due colonial interference and that the society was formerly more egalitarian (Hodgson 2000a; Hodgson 1999; Hodgson 2005, ix–x). Consequently, the Maa language lacks lexemes equivalent to the English word pair king/kingdom—מֶלֶךְ (*melek*) / מַמְלָכָה (*mamlakah*) in Hebrew and βασιλεύς (*basileús*) / βασιλεία (*basileía*) in Greek. But Maa does have an approximate set of words which Bible translators have used for these ideas. The verb <aitoré> means to exercise authority, rule, or command; the intransitive form is <aitorisho>. The noun **enkitóriá** means “authority” in Maa dialects and “command” in Sampur. In both the Maa and Samburu Bible translations, this is the term used for the biblical *mamlakah* and *basileús* (“kingdom”). One who exercises **enkitóriá** is **olaitóriani**, “the one who rules, the one who is in charge.” (Similarly, in NgaTurkana—the Nilotic language spoken by the Turkana people of Northwest Kenya—**apolou** is either the result of the **ekapolon** doing, or the realm within which the **ekapolon** does, what is indicated by the verb **apolokin**. The Nilotic languages are not alone. In kiSwahili, **ufalme** is the result of the **mfalme** doing what is indicated by the verb **kufalme**.) The member of an ageset who is chosen to serve as **olaignúénani** (literally, “the one who gives counsel” but often rendered in English as “chief”) is said to be the **olaitóriani**, the ruler, of the ageset. This term is especially important for both vernacular ecclesiology and vernacular Christology among the Maasai who confess “**olaitóriani Yesu**,” *Jesus is Lord*.

“IN A DISCUSSION OF THE CHURCH AS A FAMILY, AGNATIC KINSHIP SYSTEMS ARE NOT RELEVANT. BUT THE AGE-MATE KINSHIPS ARE GREATLY SO”
(HARRY SAWYERR 1968, 85–86).

There are two terms customarily used for “church” among Maasai Christians in Kenya. One is **enkanísa** and the other is **esírít** (*cohort* or *company* of warriors). **Enkanísa** is a loanword from the Swahili *kanisa*, in turn derived from the Arabic كنيسة (*kaniisa*), which today commonly means simply “church” but properly refers to a “congregation”; it is (or was) a straightforward translation of the Greek ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*). In ordinary usage, *kanisa* in Swahili and **enkanísa** in Maa often refer primarily to a “church building,” much as “church” in common English usage.

Each Maasai generation is known as an **olají**, or “ageset.” This refers to a group of males who were circumcised within the same time period. (Females, regardless of their age, are assigned to their husband’s ageset / **olají** when they marry.) Traditionally, circumcision marks the end of boyhood and the beginning of manhood. After a period of ritual impurity and healing, the circumcised young men are recognized as **ilmúrrân** (“the warriors”; the singular is **olmúrráni**) and celebrated as the strength, vitality, and protection of the Maasai community. Each **olají** is organized into several **isírito** (the plural of **esírít**). The **ilmúrrân**

within each *esírít* live together in community, sharing everything—a common vision and purpose as well as material possessions, food, and drink—together in a radically egalitarian *κοινωνία* (*koinōnía*, “communitarian fellowship”). So *eSírít e Kristo*, usually translated as “the Church of Christ,” literally means “the cohort of Christ.” Often *esírít* refers to an individual congregation of the Church.

This is the cultural context in which Maasai Christians confess by the Holy Spirit that *ᐃAitóriani Yesu* (“Jesus is Lord”). An *ᐃlaitóriani* does not rule over a kingdom or empire, however. The Maasai will say that “*ᐃlaigúenani oshí ᐃlaítóriání ló lpórrōr lenyé*” (“The chief, customarily speaking, is the ruler of his age-set”; Payne and Ole-Kotikash, s.v. *ᐃlaitóriani*). Technically an *olpórrōr* is only half of an ageset (*ᐃlají*), but *olpórrōr* can be used as a synecdoche to refer to the whole *ᐃlají* (see below). Jesus, then, is *ᐃAitóriani*, the one who rules over each cohort or congregation (*esírít*) of the Church.

The Masai [*sic*] have a natural concept of the age-group (*ol-porror*) that can be used to teach the unity we have in Christ. *Ol-porror* has a rich conceptual heritage of unity and mutual love. On this concept of love for all men ... the Church can be built. With Christ as the head (*ol-aiguenani*) of the group (*ol-porror*), all men who love and follow Him, regardless of race or tribe, are brothers (*il-alashera*) living a new life of love, freedom, and unity (Benson 1971, 73–74).

Properly speaking, an ageset or age-group is *ᐃlají*. An *olpórrōr* (*ol-porror*), or circumcision group, is half of an *ᐃlají*. The “right hand” *olpórrōr* is the older half of a given *ᐃlají* and the “left hand” *olpórrōr* is the younger half. Among Maasai Christians in Tanzania, *orpórrōr*⁸ *lé nkÁí* (*the circumcision-group of God*) is a common name for the “new brotherhood” of the Church (Mtaita 1998, 162–164). The term *ᐃlaigúenani*, typically translated as “chief” and serving to translate the Hebrew *melek* and Greek *basileús* (“king”) in Biblical texts means something more like “counselor” or “spokesman,” being derived from the verb *aigúén*, “to advise” or “to give counsel with wisdom.”

Harry Alphonso Eburn Sawyer (1909–1986) of Sierra Leone, an important pioneer of modern African Christian Theology, has sharply criticized the adoption of terminologies of traditional Africa chieftainships for Christologies of Christ as Chief as unsuitable (1968, 72–73). This critique is not particularly relevant, however, to this proposed *ᐃAigúenani* Christology, as the Maasai *iláigúénák* (the plural form) have little similarity to the Bantu chieftainships which Sawyer was discussing. Indeed, the translation of “chief” for *ᐃlaigúenani* has more to do with the desire of the British imperialists to find a chief or king with which to treat than with the semantic domain of the term. But as noted above, traditional Maasai

⁸ In many dialects of Maa, the liquids -l- and -r- in the masculine articular prefixes are interchangeable; *ᐃl-* = *ᐃr-*, *ol-* = *or-*, etc.

polity was more democratic in nature and this traditional role is distinct from that of **iláigúénák** who are “chiefs” politically appointed by the Kenyan or Tanzanian governments, a holdover from the colonial period.

Among the Maasai, an **ɔlaigúénani** is a “traditional life-long leader of an [**olpórrôr**; *circumcision group*] who advises members of his [**olpórrôr**], arbitrates disputes, and presides over meetings or ceremonies” (Payne and Ole-Kotikash 2008, s.v. ɔl-aigúénani). Thus each **ɔlají** has two **iláigúénák** (the plural of **ɔlaidúénani**), one **ɔlaigúénani** for each **olpórrôr**. Once an **ɔlají** has advanced beyond **márránó** (“murranhoo,” the period of being warriors), the two **ilpórorí** (the plural of **olpórrôr**) are combined, and both **iláigúénák** must be consulted for matters that effect the whole **ɔlají**. The Church, of course, has but one **ɔlaidúénani**,⁹ **Yesu Kristo** (Jesus Christ), who united and unites all the generations as one. It is worth noting that “to all generations” (εἰς πάσας τὰς γενεὰς / *eis pásas tās geneàs*) in the benediction in Ephesians 3:20–21 becomes “too lporori pooki” (phonetically **ɔó lporórí pookí**) in the Maa Bible. Thus “all generations” is “all **ilpórorí**” (the plural of **olpórrôr**, one half of an **esírít**, an ageset or a generation). The word “church” (ἐκκλησία / *ekklēsia*) in these verses becomes **esírít**. As **ɔlaidúénani**, Jesus unites in himself all generations and all congregations in all places, breaking down the dividing walls of hostility.

ΕΝΚΑΪ ΠΑΡΜÚΑΪΝ—THE GOD OF MANY COLORS

Paul refers to the multi-colored wisdom of God in Ephesians 3:10. He took the common term ποικίλος (*poikilos*), used in the LXX of Genesis 37:3 to describe Joseph’s “variegated” or “many colored” garment, and adds the intensifying and multiplying prefix πολυ- (*polu-*; often transliterated as *poly-*) to coin a new term to describe the multi-variegated, multifaceted, or even multidimensional nature of God’s wisdom: πολυποικίλος (*polupoikilos*). The “manifold wisdom of God” (so KJV, RSV, ESV, NIV, NASB, *et al.*) approaches the sense but could be stronger. The NET with “multifaceted wisdom” and the NLT with “wisdom in its rich variety” do better. The Maasai address God as **Parmúàin**, “O One-of-so-many-colors,” to refer to their theological belief that God both has many attributes and is in control of all circumstances, whether those are experienced as good or bad. Thus the Maasai speak of **enkáí nányókíé**, “God who is red,” to refer to God’s anger or to God as the Master of Life and Death and as **enkáí nárók**, “God who is black,” to refer to God’s goodness and blessing.¹⁰

⁹ In the Christian tradition, the Holy Spirit is also known as a Counselor, a common translation of παράκλητος / *paráklētos*, whence “Paraclete”; in the Maa Bible, however, another word for counselor or guide is used when referring to the Holy Spirit, **olAutaroni**.

¹⁰ A number of western commentators have taken this to refer to two different gods (**inkáitin**), but this likely represents a shallow knowledge of Maa language and culture.

Parmúàin indicates that God is able to cause anything of any colour to happen or to come to existence. God is in charge of all seasons: the dry season mostly signified by dry brown bushes, grass and trees that have shed all their leaves and the animals that are poor in health; the wet season signified by green grass, bushes and flowering shrubs, trees that have green leaves, and animals that are generally healthy and giving birth to new animals. In all situations, the people are simply telling God that “You are in charge of everything, and have the power to change every shade/colour of life.” The people are asking for God’s help, for example, especially to change a bad situation (so A. Keswe Mapena ole Lekutit, in Payne 2003, 185–186; and in Payne and Ole-Kotikash 2008, s.v. *Parmúain*).

As with **enkÁí púsóshóke**, the name *Parmúàin* is only used of **enkÁí** and is never applied to people. When Maasai begin a prayer with “**NÁÁÍ Parmúain ...**” they are recognizing the *polupoíkilos* reality of God’s nature—God’s transcendence and immanence, God’s justice and mercy.

“KARA NANU ILO ORA (I AM WHO I AM)”

We have seen that many of the Maasai cultural names for God are similar to biblical language for God in the OT and NT, such as God as Shepherd, Guard, Refuge, and Healer. But what about the divinely revealed name יהוה (*YHWH*)? When it comes to handling יהוה in either Bible translations or Christian speech, there are three competing options. This name can be transliterated (e.g., as *Yahweh*), there can be an attempt at translating the presumed meaning of the name based on Exodus 3:14, or the translators can follow the venerable tradition of pretending to read אֲדֹנָי (*’ādōnāy*), δεσπότης (*despótēs*), or κύριος (*kúrios*) when יהוה appears in the OT text. Most English translations opt for Lord or LORD to represent the divine name YHWH.

The first Maa Bible (BSM-1991) was translated from the RSV, with occasional reference to the Living Bible paraphrase, with no reference to the biblical languages. So the established English tradition of using “LORD” was of course continued, yielding “Olaitoriani” (Olaítóriani; Maa versions do not use IPA orthography). The revised and corrected Maa Bible (BSM-2018) retained this usage.¹¹ To the best of my knowledge, this is the route that has been followed in other Nilotic languages, including the Sampur NT. For NgaTurkana, the case is identical to the Maa—the NgaTurkana Bible (*Abibilia Ngakiro Naajokak* 2001) was

¹¹ I was a translation consultant for the recent corrected edition (*Biblia Sinyati* 2018) and argued for a strong vernacularization of the new translation. But some things, like the “Olaitoriani” and a transliteration instead of a translation of all of the βαπτίζ- terms, was too firmly established to challenge successfully. My suggestion to at least capitalize the term as OLAI TORIANI or OLAI TORIANI to inform alert readers where יהוה/*Yahweh* is the underlying name of God in Hebrew was not followed. See also Elness-Hanson 2020.

translated from the GNB/TEV, and so “LORD” appeared for YHWH, yielding **Ekapolon** which is roughly analogous with **Olaitóriani** in Maa. For Rendille, the NT translation is still underway and the OT hasn’t yet been begun. The Kalenjin translation follows suit—the English title “Lord” is more or less translated. In Exod 3:14 in BSM-1991, יהוה אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי לְךָ (‘‘I Am Who I Am’’) was rendered as ‘‘ARA NANU ILO ORA,’’ literally *I-am I that-[previously-mentioned-one] who-is*. In the corrected edition (BSM-2018), this was changed slightly to ‘‘KARA NANU ILO ORA;’’ the addition of the *k-* prefix can indicate a future aspect. For the second phrase, ‘‘I AM has sent you,’’ יהוה אֲשֶׁר is translated in the first edition as ‘‘ARA NANU’’ (*I AM*) and in the second as ‘‘ILO ORA’’ (*THAT ONE WHO IS*). In my forthcoming Maa-language introduction to the Bible, I include a discussion of these translation issues.

‘‘... THE CHRISTIAN HAS SOMETHING TO LEARN FROM THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN;
NOT IN THE SENSE OF NEW DOCTRINES, BUT IN THE SENSE OF NEW INSIGHTS
AND NEW WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING GOD’’ (NYAMITI 1977, 57).

It is in the use of vernacular names, themes, and imagery that we can see that ‘‘Christianity in Africa is a truly African experience’’ (Bediako 2004, 11). The rich variety of names for God in various African contexts, and even within the single context of the Maasai, reflects the ‘‘infinite translatability of the Church [and] of Christianity in general’’ (Kwiyani 2020, 126). As an important ‘‘task of African theology is to interpret concepts of God in such a way that African believers feel a natural closeness to the one God’’ (Muzorewa 2000, 10), an exploration of these different Maasai names for God can help the Maasai Church grow in theological maturity and to become more deeply rooted in Scripture. Kwame Bediako observed that, in Ghana, ‘‘the God of the Bible turned out to be the God whose name has been hallowed in vernacular usage for generations’’ (1995, 55). That is certainly true in the Maasai and Samburu contexts in Kenya and Tanzania as well. But the vernacularization of Christianity in Africa has ramifications beyond the Church in Africa. World Christianity without the contributions of African Christianity (and thus of African cultures and languages) is impoverished. Harry Sawyerr notes that ‘‘the Christianization of Africa should mean not only a transplantation of cultures from cultures foreign to Africa but the integration of African culture into the fabric of humanity, thereby adding a new dimension to the already complex polyhedral’’ (1968, 80).

At the beginning of this essay, I observed that when we know and use our vernacular language and culture well, we are able to bring out from our storehouse treasures old in our culture to share as new treasures in Christ with the Church at large. In using the term ‘‘storehouse,’’ in addition to the obvious allusion to Matt 13:52, I am thinking here of the Maa translation of Ps 119:11, ‘‘Atushuma

nanu Ororei lino to ltau lai pee maas ng’oki ake tialo iyie” (Olkerempe Le Nkai 119:11, BSM-2018). Here the verb “atushuma” (the past tense of **ashúm**) is both a more accurate and richer translation of the Hebrew אָפַן (šāpanētí) than the customary English rendering, “I have hidden.” The usual word for “to hide” in Maa is **aisudoó** (and related cognates), which is roughly analogous to the English term. But **ashúm**, similar to the Hebrew אָפַן (šāpan), has the sense of “to store up provisions in a safe place in order to have immediate access to them when they are needed.” When we store up deep reflections both on the insights of vernacular language and culture and on the words of Scripture, our theologizing is prepared to serve the needs of the African churches.¹² I hope that this modest attempt to explore what a Maasai or Samburu vernacular theology might sound like will both encourage other practitioners to embrace and celebrate the use of mother-tongues in African churches and will encourage my Maasai and Samburu siblings-in-Christ to make full use both of Maa culture and language and the Scriptures as they build up the **eSírít e Kristo** in Maasailand and Samburuland. As both groups do so, may they be found faithful stewards who bring out of the storehouse many treasures both old and new.

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¹² For further examples of this, see my discussions on “Oсотua: The Tie that Binds,” “Esiankiki Nirikitoi” and “Olopolosu Esita: The Fence-Remover” (Barron 2019, 20–21).

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