

The Life and Missionary Theology of Bishop Athanasius of Kisumu and Western Kenya

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Abstract:

This essay integrates a biographical sketch of His Grace, Bishop Athanasius of Kisumu and Western Kenya with a reflection on the missiology of Bishop Athanasius' doctoral thesis. It demonstrates how His Grace' life was directed and shaped by the missionary theology that he lived.

Un vieillard qui meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle.

An elder that dies is a library that burns.

Amadou Hampâté Bâ

Masaba, the son of Akunda, the son of Obukuyi, the son of Lwabi, son of Esikundu, young son of Ambeba, son of Ekhubi, son of Anyole who is the father of the Banyore people,¹ was born in 1971 to Banyore parents, given the Christian name "Amos," and baptized at the age of five by Fr Demetrios Okubasu at St Matthew Orthodox Church Esabwali in Ebukhubi. At death he was known as His Grace Athanasius, first Bishop of the Orthodox Church of Kisumu and Western Kenya, and was buried in 2019 at the Church of the Dormition in Igonyi, twenty kilometers from his birthplace.

A student of mission, steeped in his people's history, a practitioner of the Gospel endowed with the charisma of episcopal ministry, His Grace was uniquely po-

¹ The Banyore are one of eighteen tribes that make up the Abaluhya, a nation of 5.3 million in western Kenya. Banyore is plural; Munyore is singular. Their language is Lunyore and their homeland Bunyore.

sitioned to write a new volume in the story of Orthodoxy in Western Kenya. With his vision of local empowerment, his compassion for the residents of Africa's burgeoning cities, and his enthusiasm for theological education and intellectual rigor at every level, Bishop Athanasius had already opened the first chapter of that volume. Indeed, his person already contained the education, experience, research, fieldwork, wisdom and knowledge to fill a library.

That library has burned.

It is up to us to salvage what books we can. Across the world there are friends, fellow-laborers, and disciples of His Grace with stories of the child of the Bunyore highlands who allowed the Holy Spirit to fill his life and bring grace to many. May these stories be preserved. Bishop Athanasius also left us his own writings, including his 334-page doctoral thesis at the University of South Africa, entitled *Orthodox Christian Dialogue with Banyore Culture*. I hope to salvage one more book from that burning library by gleaning—and presenting to you—the missionary theology found within that volume.

That ideas are personal, and that persons exist in relationship, is a characteristically African truth with global scope. The academic and missiological output of His Grace is best received in the context of his social and theological family.

Mwanadamu atakufa; jina lake litakaa.

The mortal will die; his name will abide.

Swahili saying

Masaba the son of Akunda grew up in the smallholder farming communities of Bunyore, a region in Kenya's western hills north of Lake Victoria's Winam Gulf, about eighty-five kilometers from the Ugandan border. His father Josaphat Akunda was an Orthodox theologian and catechist, trained at St Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary in the United States, who gave his eldest son opportunities for similar education. Amos Masaba's theological training began in Nairobi at the Orthodox Patriarchal Ecclesiastical School of Makarios III, where he completed the diploma course and was ordained deacon by Archbishop Seraphim of Nairobi in 1998. After obtaining a Master of Divinity at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in the United States, he was sent to South Africa and ordained priest in 2002 by Archbishop Seraphim, now of Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Father Athanasius was initially sent to catechize congregations of the non-canonical "African Orthodox Church" in Soshanguve outside Pretoria as they prepared to be received into canonical Orthodoxy. This was that same African Orthodox Church of South Africa—affiliated with Marcus Garvey and the Pan-Africanist movement—which in 1932 had begun sending its archbishop, Daniel William Al-

exander, on a series of missionary journeys to establish and strengthen indigenous Christian movements in Kenya and Uganda. In East Africa, those flocks—numbering in the tens of thousands—were received canonically into the Patriarchate of Alexandria in 1946. Now, half a century later, Father Athanasius noted that he as a child of Kenyan Orthodoxy had been recalled to bring his own spiritual forbears into the Church’s fold. Working to create the first interracial Orthodox congregations following 50 years of apartheid, Fr Athanasius was made Deputy Dean of the Catechetical School in Yeoville, Director of Missions for the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, representative of the Patriarchate of Alexandria at the World Council of Churches and All Africa Council of Churches, and enrolled in the doctoral program in theology at the University of South Africa where he received a ThD in Missiology in 2010. His experience was not limited to theology, as he was a veteran high school teacher with a degree in Education from the India Institute of Management and a diploma in TEFL from the Cambridge Institute of English Language in Boston.

Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.

A person is a person because of people.

Zulu saying

As a highly-educated man with cosmopolitan experience, Father Athanasius saw quickly that his formation could alienate him from the people he served. Having just arrived from Boston, His Grace says, “I had a western mentality... I had spent most of my time in America where things were run in a western way.”² Being non-fluent in the local language, he attempted to communicate with his congregation by typing up English-language sermons and announcements in a church bulletin, but was frustrated to see the bulletins left unread in the church pews. The people were likewise upset and brought their complaints to an elder who told the priest “that people want to hear me talk to them... they want interaction. They do not appreciate being sent letters.” So Father Athanasius began preaching and making announcements orally, through an interpreter, “and this made a great difference.” Reflecting on this he says, “My many years in the West had made me forget that even my Banyore culture is not a reading culture but an oral culture. Orthodoxy in Bunyore and in many areas in Africa was transmitted orally through teachings and stories and rituals.” (198)

This reflection on the reception of Orthodoxy into Bunyore—a process that, His Grace began to realize, was grounded in oral communication and interpersonal di-

² Amos Masaba Akunda, *Orthodox Christian Dialogue with Banyore Culture*. (PhD thesis, University of South Africa, 2013), 197.

alogue—developed into a doctoral thesis. Father Athanasius made several trips to Kenya, studying the archives at the Archdiocesan headquarters and interviewing founding members of the Orthodox Church in Bunyore as well as their heirs. The inception of Bunyore Orthodoxy, he found, came at a crucial moment in Kenyan history, transforming the character of the Church in Kenya from a proto-Orthodox nationalist movement to a multiethnic, evangelistic, and canonically Orthodox body with the resilience to survive a decade of persecution, and to expand with minimal outside support. In particular, he saw the missionary journeys of His Grace Bishop George of Nitria (then Father George Arthur Gatũng'ũ wa Gathuna) as marked by the same character as Paul, Apostle to the Nations, and as his heir St Innocent, Apostle to Alaska.

Interpersonal dialogue, His Grace asserts, is fundamental to the Orthodox Christian faith which “is not intellectual [but] revolves around stories about Jesus Christ, his followers and the saints, and it is because of these stories that people can relate to Christianity.” (198) Preference for oral communication over the written word is witnessed in the life of Jesus Christ—himself the living Word—who ministered orally in living relationships with persons, and whose Apostles had proclaimed the εὐαγγέλιον orally throughout the known world before the textual form of this Gospel message was put in order and inscribed in books.

*Elimu maisha, si vitabu.
Education is life, not books.*

Swahili saying

Bishop Athanasius describes the damage that “classroom spirituality” has inflicted on oral cultures. When Christianity was first brought to Bunyore by the Protestant Church of God, it “became a classroom religion... those who converted... were called ‘Abasomi’ (people of the book), which explains how the local people perceived Christianity as the religion of the intellectuals. Only those who could read and write could be Christians.” (137) Christianity was seen as a “daylight religion of reason, set over against the dark of superstition.” The wisdom, insight, and traditional practices of Banyore culture were dismissed as dark superstitions and left untouched, rather than being illumined by the Christian faith. The Christianity that was brought to Bunyore “bore no relationship to the traditional ritual or the contemporary prayer of African life. This is the reason why many converts had to double deal, go to the churches and at the same time continue worshipping in their traditional ways.” (137) Because the Christian mission failed to address the realities and needs of Banyore life, the Banyore people could not bring all of their lives to Christianity. Where Christianity failed to reach, they continued local religious

practices that *did* address the daily needs of life outside the classroom. Christ, His Grace laments, “was presented as an answer to the questions and quests a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that a western man would feel, the saviour of the world for the European worldview.” (138) What they needed, rather, was a new Apostle Paul who would make himself “all things to all people, that” he “might by all means save some.” (1 Cor 9: 22)

The relevance of the South African philosophy of *Ubuntu* (“personhood” in isi-Zulu) became apparent to Father Athanasius: “a person is a person because of people.” In contrast to the “classroom spirituality” of Western missions, the spirituality of *Ubuntu* grounds a Christian’s identity in relationship to Christ while surrounded by the community, revealed in dialogue. “God cannot be limited to space or a book and the classroom is but just a small fraction of the struggle to learn about God and it alone cannot lead us closer to God unless our entire life creates space for us to learn.” (140) The Banyore already knew that their being *was* communion, and in Orthodoxy they found authentic practice of this truth:

The local people themselves successfully carried out the mission in Bunyore, they used their own funds and means to seek the Orthodox Church. No missionary came to Bunyore to introduce Orthodoxy but the Banyore people themselves having heard of Orthodoxy went to seek for it in all parts of Kenya.

Orthodox Christian Dialogue with Banyore Culture, 81

By the 1940s, many Banyore Christians had come to distrust the religious intentions of Western mission churches due to their alliance with an oppressive political regime, their perceived ignorance of local language and culture, suppression of customary initiation rites, characterization of traditional fellowship as satanic, and unwillingness to dialogue with Banyore people on Banyore terms. In 1942 a council of elders at Ebikhuyu, responding to rumors that an “African Orthodox Church” had taken root close to the seat of Kenya’s colonial power, appointed three delegates to investigate the news.

Asiyesafiri, taa haing'ari.

The one who does not travel sheds no light.

Swahili saying

Meshack Sialuma, John Khoyi, and Joseph Akunda traveled some 400 kilometers across the Great Rift Valley to Kenya’s central highlands, the traditional home of the Agĩkũyũ³ people near the British capital of Nairobi. Arriving in Kiambu, they were

³ Plural Agĩkũyũ, singular Gĩkũyũ. The Agĩkũyũ are the largest nation in Kenya, and

welcomed by the lone priest of this movement, Father George Arthur Gatũng'ũ wa Gathuna (later His Grace, Bishop George of Nitria), who had been ordained by Archbishop Daniel William Alexander of the South African "African Orthodox Church" during that prelate's 1936–7 sojourn in Kenya. Archbishop Alexander had organized an ecclesial body with strong lay leadership. The Secretary of the African Orthodox Church of Kenya Ezekiel Kamau, and his associates Paul Njuguna and Johannes Kimani hosted and catechized the three delegates for eighteen months before Father George sent them back to Bunyore together with three Agĩkũyũ catechists—Gilbert Njoku, Thuku Githaro, and another whose name is remembered in heaven.

The catechists' reports inspired the Agĩkũyũ Christians to send a fourth teacher, and in 1946 Father George—having just become a canonical priest of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa—made his first missionary journey to western Kenya. In four days he baptized nearly five hundred souls, and yearly visits continued until his 1952 incarceration by the British colonial government.⁴

Like the Apostle Paul, and in contrast to previous Western missions, Bishop Athanasius says that Father George made himself "all things to all people." Of special note is this Gĩkũyũ missionary's readiness to sit at the common meal with his Banyore hosts and partake with them from the common cup, both of which Western missionaries had refused to do. One of the thesis' sources, Father Cosmas Akunda, says:

I remember that when Gathuna visited Bunyore as a missionary, he had to dance to the Banyore Esikuti (traditional drum) dance, eat omurele (Banyore special vegetables), share in the traditional beer, and through this common sharing, he had already demonstrated the Orthodox understanding of a Eucharistic community and this helped very much for both teaching and receiving the Eucharist itself among the converts. They had discovered that this was similar to the communion that they have when they are gathered around for traditional beer and drank from the same pot with straws. (206)

were among the first of the interior peoples to be conquered and displaced by British settlers. In older texts, they are called "Kikuyu."

⁴ In 1952 Governor Evelyn Baring responded to the Kenyan independence movement by declaring a state of emergency with the Agĩkũyũ people as its particular target. Indigenous central Kenyan institutions such as schools and churches were closed and their leaders arrested. More than one million Agĩkũyũ were forced from their homes and resettled into concentration camps. Father George Gatũng'ũ wa Gathuna was among another half million civic leaders and freedom fighters who were imprisoned in forced labor camps, where prisoners were routinely interrogated and subjected to torture. When the state of emergency was lifted in 1960, as many as 300,000 indigenous Kenyans were dead or presumed dead, along with thirty-two European victims.

*Elimu haina mwisho.**Education has no end.*

Swahili saying

In 2015, Father Athanasius was recalled to Kenya initially as a seminary professor, then in 2016 the Holy Synod of Alexandria appointed him first Bishop of the newly-created see of Kisumu and Western Kenya. Kisumu, a city of over one million, sits on the head of Lake Victoria's Winam Gulf. As the terminus of the Uganda Railway and principal point of access connecting the Indian Ocean to Africa's inland seas, Kisumu is Kenya's third great metropolis and is one of that country's oldest settlements, having served for centuries as the place of commercial and cultural exchange among the Joluo, Abagusii, Nandi and Abaluhya nations.

The Banyore are one of eighteen tribes of the Abaluhya nation, whose homeland is in the hills north of the Winam Gulf. Immediately upon receiving Orthodoxy, Banyore converts began evangelizing other Abaluhya tribes and reaching across national boundaries to bring Orthodoxy to the Nandi and Abagusii. Because Black Africans were forbidden from living in Kenyan cities, the remarkable growth of Orthodoxy around Lake Victoria was entirely restricted to rural population centers.

Segregation was abolished with political independence in 1963, and Kisumu has been a majority Black city for generations. Kenya itself is rapidly urbanizing, with one quarter of its 47 million people living in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu or other major centers. Yet the historic location of Kenyan Orthodoxy in rural, agrarian areas has all but prevented the Church in Western Kenya from engaging in urban evangelism or in providing pastoral care for those of its flock whose education, employment, or poverty carry them away from the homestead and into the city.

The new Bishop of Kisumu established his Diocese headquarters in Igonyi, a rural center close to the Church's Abaluhya and Nandi flocks but within reach of the great city. Bishop Athanasius' years of urban ministry in South Africa raised his awareness of the need for, and challenges of, an urban witness. On Palm Sunday 2018 the parish of St Moses of Africa began worshiping in the living room of an Orthodox Christian in Kisumu, with the mandate that it was to be the first Orthodox parish in the Diocese depending on its congregation to provide for the needs of the parish and the salary of its priest, while giving stewardship to the Diocese.

Although the principle of a self-sufficient indigenous community had been the norm from the establishment of Gatũng'ũ wa Gathuna's proto-Orthodox movement in 1929 through the years of growth and persecution all the way until Kenya's 1963 independence, subsequent generations of overseas charity had crippled the people's capacity to tend to the needs of their own Church. Stunned by the apparent poverty of rural Kenyans, foreign well-wishers had failed to notice the fertile

farmland, ancient traditions of self-reliance, and firm resilience of the Abaluhya, Nandi, and Abagusii nations. In recent years many have not adequately appreciated Kenya's rapidly-expanding economy, which has brought nearly five million people into a resilient local middle class, not dependent on foreign aid either for their own livelihood or for the capacity to do charitable development work among their own poor. As churches, dioceses and parishes from outside Africa took it upon themselves to manage the construction of church buildings, to fund and administer schools and clinics, and to bankroll clergy compensation, many Orthodox Christian Kenyans became dis-educated about their own inheritance, and fell prey to the toxic belief that they were an entirely disempowered people.

Bishop Athanasius had a monumental task, struggling to turn back a mentality of disempowerment that had persisted for fifty years. He readily admitted the temporary necessity of conducting fundraising campaigns in North America to meet the day-to-day budgetary needs of his own Diocese, and indeed to supply his clergy with the sustenance that their congregations had forgotten how to provide. Yet the urban mission to Kisumu stood to become a prototype parish, evidence of the new, yet also historical and traditional, means of Orthodox Kenyans providing for the material needs of their own Church.

Kufa ni nini? Ni kuonana na baba.

What is death? It is meeting the ancestors (fathers).

Swahili saying

His Grace claims that "the theology of the Church was formed in Africa... the great minds of the Church came from Africa. It may not be an exaggeration that Africa is the mother of our theology." (25) He highlights as African Orthodox ancestors the teachers of the Catechetical School of Alexandria including "Athenagoras, Clement the Alexandrene, St Athanasius, St Didymus and Origen." His Grace hoped for Kisumu to be a Kenyan Alexandria, with its own Catechetical School like the ancient one that was "open to catechumens, those who believed in Christ but needed more instruction on how to live as Christians [and] dialogue with the pagans and was therefore open to pagan students who were searching for the truth." (34)

Reconciliation and dialogue, central to his doctoral thesis, became foundational themes to His Grace' ministry and outlook. Orthodox Christianity, he insists, dialogues, reconciles, and ultimately integrates disparate cultures with one another through Christ. "We cannot talk to an African about the Kingdom of God, how powerful it is, when we cannot respect his kingdom, when we do not recognize his traditional leaders as kings, queens, [who] form his visible kingdom and through

whom he can be able to understand the invisible Kingdom of God.” In Orthodoxy “past, present and future are seen in the same camera, for example in the Eucharist, the future, past and present are realised at the same time. An African Banyore... does not see any distinction between the three. All of the three sustain life and form a community.” (139)

The living man is happier because he is alive, but the dead one is more powerful.

Bishop Athanasius Amos Masaba Akunda of Kisumu, 1971 - 2019

It was on a journey to the United States, reconnecting with seminary friends and raising funds to undergird his apostolic ministry, that Bishop Athanasius suddenly took ill and was hospitalized in Worcester, Massachusetts in late 2018. His Grace died in the hospital on January 4 2019, and returned to Kenya for burial later that month. This loss was felt acutely across the world, and especially in his abruptly widowed Diocese. Yet in an African—and Orthodox—worldview, the power of Bishop Athanasius’ presence is undiminished. Past, present, and future are united in the *Ubuntu* of *κοινωνία*, and death can be the gateway for a person’s reality and authority to increase as she or he enters the realm of the ancestors. “The Orthodox theology of the saints who become more powerful after their death and intercede for us, therefore appealed to the African people of Banyore, who saw their departed ancestors (those who lived well and virtuously) as more powerful than those still living.” (139)

To the Orthodox Christian, the substance of *Ubuntu* is *κοινωνία* or communion—that “binding force for the living, the dead, and those yet to be born” (132)—which comes from the personhood of Jesus Christ, through our Eucharistic participation in his life, death, and Resurrection. Communion creates an environment of “careful listening, promotion of love, and spiritual vigilance” which is a “backbone upon which the Banyore conversion was based.” (132) Just as the incarnation of Christ unites the spiritual and material worlds, so the *κοινωνία* of Christ unites disparate people, welcoming their unique personhood and binding them together through their common union with the Divine Person. It is this *Ubuntu* of *κοινωνία* which makes unique experiences part of the universal experience, which binds the unique story of Bishop Athanasius and the Banyore with the universal story of all the saints of all the ages. Through his untimely death, Bishop Athanasius becomes a universal figure. He becomes an ancestor to his Holy Diocese of Kisumu and Western Kenya, and becomes ancestor to all of us who share with him a common ancestor: our one Lord, Jesus Christ.

When a father is in paradise, his monastery can flourish.

Orthodox monastic saying

Masaba the son of Akunda has a spiritual lineage and legacy more significant and real than even his corporeal parentage. This apostolic heritage is now planted only twenty kilometers from his birthplace, where the Church of Kisumu has as a powerful ancestor her first “father in paradise,” resting in Igonyi beside the Church of the Dormition, standing in intercession at the Father’s eternal throne, on behalf of all the spiritual children of Athanasius the first Bishop of Kisumu, ordained by Theodore II Pope of Alexandria, himself ordained by Pope Parthenios III, successor to Pope John V the Merciful, successor to Pope Cyril I the Great, successor to Pope Athanasius I the Great, successor to Mark the Evangelist first Bishop of Alexandria, himself sent as an Apostle by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. ■

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Deacon James was raised by Protestant missionary parents in Northern and Western Kenya. He first discovered Orthodox Christianity in classroom textbooks on Kenyan history, which highlighted the contribution of the African Orthodox Church of Kenya to that nation’s struggle for self-reliance and self-determination. After converting to Orthodoxy as a young adult, he returned to Africa as a Long-Term Missionary with the

Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC), serving the Holy Archdiocese of Mwanza and Western Tanzania 2010–2013. A graduate of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Deacon James serves St Joseph Damascene Antiochian Orthodox Church in Delta, British Columbia, Canada and works as a Mission Specialist in the Translation Program of OCMC.