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African retrospect and prospect : a Christian view from Cameroon - interview with Paul Nchoji Nkwi

African Retrospect and Prospect : A Christian view from Cameroon - Interview with Paul Nchoji Nkwi November 28, 2017

Interviewee: Paul Nchoji Nkwi is Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the Catholic University of Cameroon (Bamenda), Member of the Constitutional Council of Cameroon, and *DACB* Advisor
Interviewed by Jonathan Bonk, *DACB* Project Director and *JACB* Editor

Please tell us a little bit about yourself: Where were you born? Where did you grow up? What were the circumstances of your home/family as you were growing up?

I was born on October 13, 1940 in a village called Wombong, a village whose key members brought the Christian faith to this part of Cameroon (Catholic, Baptist and Presbyterian). For almost eighteen years I lived in this small village perched on the slope of Mount Boyo. My father married my mother in 1924 after serving as palace notable as a young man. When the first missionaries arrived in Kom country in 1913, the ruler sent him to consult the gods about the new religion. He came back with the message that the Christian faith was unstoppable. He left the palace, became a Christian. He brought us up in the Christian faith and he married my mother who herself was converted.

Can you tell our readers about your education? What kinds of schools did you attend as a boy? As a young adult? As a young man?

I did not go to school until I was ten years old. The school was about three kilometers away and despite that fact that other kids travelled that distance, my father considered it still too far for me. At age ten, I went to the primary school where I spent eight years and eventually went on to secondary school at age eighteen. At St. Joseph's College, Sasse, I was able to complete my secondary education by graduating with a GCE/West African School certificate in 1963. By the time I started university studies I was 23.

At that age, I was mature enough to study the most difficult subject: philosophy with metaphysics—a hard nut to crack. After four years of philosophical studies at Bigard Memorial Seminary, I flew to Rome to begin theological studies at the Pontifical Urban University. I graduated in 1971 with great honors and specialized in Christology. At this stage, my thirst for a greater knowledge of my culture or the philosophy of culture sent me on an exploration for greater knowledge. I spent the next five years studying anthropology and all its vicissitudes. From 1971 on, and with qualifications in philosophy and

theology, I studied for the masters and PhD in anthropology at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Obtaining a PhD eventually landed me on my first job at the University of Yaoundé in 1976. From the time I had entered primary school in 1950 until I started teaching anthropology at the university it had taken me 26 years of schooling

Why did you decide to become an anthropologist?

While at the university we had a Ghanaian professor, Fr. Akoi, who taught us essentials elements of culture. When I began to read the monographs about my people by Phylis Kaberry (1910–1977) [1] and Elisabeth Chilver (1914–1971) [2], two British anthropologists, I thought I could do better, being born and bred in the Kom culture. Brought up using the cultural-historical method (*kulturhistorische Methode*) I was fascinated with the understanding of culture from a historical perspective. What we called *culture* has been crafted and engineered by generations of human groups. I was interested in this historical process of understanding culture generally, and my people particularly, and anthropology seemed to be the discipline that could shape me and creatively transform my human intellect to understanding the inner vicissitudes of human and cultural behavior.

How would you describe your work and community involvement?

My work in the university was an entry point into my involvement in local community affairs. Teaching applied anthropology to students, and from time to time engaging as a consultant to NGOs made me aware of the need to give back to the communities that shaped me with the knowledge that made me what I am today. Appointed first in the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research successively as program officer, deputy director, acting director and finally as senior adviser opened up avenues of engagement in community activities that I could otherwise never have known. My first community engagement began in 1982 when, as a group of elite from the Kom community, we organized the mobilization of funds to provide a variety of projects in education, water and electricity, sports and social infrastructure. We made it possible that every year the external elite would spend three days around Christmas working with the local people to mobilize funds for projects. For ten years (1982-1992), I served as president of Njinikom Area Development Association (NADA), an outfit I created to pull resources into rural development projects.

With the structural adjustment programs (SAP) of the Bretton Woods Institutions [3] eliminating state subsidies for social services, it was impossible for

many rural communities to survive. The state started imposing charges on basic services to vulnerable populations. In 2002, working with a group of the educated elite, we decided to increase the accessibility of financial services to rural populations by establishing a micro-finance enterprise "MC2 NjiniKom."[4] Within another ten years, we were able to inject over $560,000 into the local economy and empower more and more women to access to financial services.

Another engagement has been the creation of technical schools within the rural community. As I had been sponsored by a Canadian family while pursuing my philosophical and theological studies, it was now time for me to educate others. Lawrenz Bens died leaving behind about $3,000 for me. I was able to combine this sum with my own resources and use it to construct four classrooms. These classrooms were used to train many young people in technical areas: electricity, wood technology, computer literacy, secretariat, building construction and so on. Since 1989, over 800 young men and women have received this rudimentary technical education which has greatly enhanced their lives. My vision was that a country's development depends on such technical skills that can transform people's lives.

How did you come to be a Roman Catholic?

My parents came to accept Christ as adults. I was born into the Catholic Faith and baptized while I was barely a few days old. Accepting Christ is like accepting food for the soul. There is no need to wait until a child grows up and decides which faith to follow. My parents had chosen the Catholic faith they strongly believed in and they brought up all their children, including me, as Catholics.

Can you tell us something more about your family?

My parents were fervent Catholics whose conversion lead them to live a monogamous married life, very uncommon in their day. They had twelve children, all brought up as Catholics, four girls and eight boys. I am one of the surviving sons of my parents. I married Maria-Goretti Ntein in 1974 and today we have three boys and two girls. We were fortunate to work for the government of Cameroon and consequently we were able to save enough money to train our five kids both at home and abroad. Today, my first son lives in Australia, my second son lives with me and supports the family's social and charitable activities, the third son lives and works in the USA. My first daughter lives and works in France while my second daughter lives and works in Douala, Cameroon. With nine grandkids, we almost form a clan and, with four nationalities within the family, I consider us a miniature "United Nations."

Please give us your perspective on various world and African affairs over the years: As you look at the continent of Africa in the decades following the official departure of colonial governments, are you able to offer some general impressions on what you have observed?

African nations seem to have been ill prepared for independence. The pressure of the independent Afro-Asian nations in the late 1940s seems to have predicated that ill-prepared colonies achieved independence. In the late 1950s, only about six African nations enjoyed a certain amount of independence, namely Ethiopia, Liberia, Morocco, Ghana, Guinea, and Egypt. This would constitute the short-lived "Casablanca bloc." [5] Its vision was for a "United States of Africa" (USA) with one federal government and a common high command for defense. The establishment of the USA was to take effect at a meeting in 1960 in Monrovia, Liberia. The six nations were not able to achieve their dream at Monrovia because new African nations emerging from colonialism were unwilling to see their countries become small units within this amorphous body called USA. Most of the newly independent countries opted for full autonomy of their political entities. Most French-speaking countries (sixteen of them) resisted the idea of a strong united Africa. The 1960 meeting in Monrovia virtually buried the idea and by the time they met in Lagos, the idea of the "Organization of African Unity" (OAU) applied the *coup de grâce* to the concept of the "United States of Africa." OAU soon became an "old boys club" of presidents whose actions and decisions were ultimately meaningless because no state could interfere in the internal affairs of OAU members. The organization became moribund until the European Union's success served to resuscitate the idea. But it is hard to detect any functional significance in the actual political and economic integrity of its member nations. To me, the failure to follow the ideals of the Casablanca block model was the first misstep for Africa.

Are you generally positive or negative about the future of the continent? Please explain.

Under the current leadership, the future of Africa looks bleak. Some leaders came into power using western democratic principles but realized that the DNA of an African leader puts one in place for life. Prior to European invasion and the imposition of their governance, many African people practiced the principle of the "chief for life." A chief was not chosen for a specified time period, he was chosen for life. This principle was indeed the hallmark of the two African political systems: stateless and state societies. In African state societies, the ruler or chief was chosen on the basis of genealogical norms and consanguineous ties was the defining principle. In stateless African systems, power was not hereditary but

defined by a person's capacity to articulate the aspirations of the groups. Once chosen on that basis, the ruler was ruler was for life. The British recognized the existing governance system and used it in their policy of indirect rule defined as "do not create or impose institutions on people if those on the ground can perform its desired functions in the same way or even better." Then, the introduction of western democracy in the selection of African leaders forgot to consider the inert or inner disposition of African leaders to stay on in power forever. African leaders get caught in the trappings of power to the extent that it is their personal survival rather than the defense and achievement of the common good. This attitude has led to an underdeveloped Africa, high levels of corruption, nepotism, the death of meritocracy, and the exploitation of strategic ethnicity for political ends. These constitute the vices that have plagued Africa.

Can you comment on the Church across Africa? According to commonly cited statistics from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, in 1910, only 9% of Africa's population was Christian, and 80% of Christians lived in just four countries: Ethiopia, South Africa, Egypt, and Madagascar. According to this source, by 1970, Africa's Christian percentage had risen to 38.7%, many of whom were converts from religions that were indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa. By 2020, the percentage of Africans who self-identify as "Christian" is expected to reach 49.3%.

To be honest I believe that by 2020, at least 50% of Africans will identify themselves as Christians. Although Islam is making in-roads in Africa, it is my intelligent guess that Christianity will be the dominant religion on the African continent. What are the facts? First, the invasion of Africa by evangelical movements is a positive move for Christianity. Our towns, especially, are infested with these movement and they are exploiting the poverty of many Africans. Second, the emergence of the radical Islamic movement is casting doubts on the Islamic faith. How can Africans follow a religious movement that advocates the killing of the innocent? African culture does not tolerate the killing of the innocent—especially killing through abortion. Most African cultures value and protect human rights and frown on those who go against such principles. Third, Catholics have witnessed a resurgence in vocations to the priesthood and the preaching corps of the Catholics is increasingly better prepared for the ministry than ever before. Today, it is not enough to do "*cursus seminaristicus*" (just enough to perform the basic functions of a priest) but priests must acquire knowledge at the university—both at the graduate and postgraduate levels. The decline in priestly vocations in Europe is prompting western churches to turn to Africa for backup. For example, the Diocese of Portsmouth in England have a

number of Cameroon priests from the Archdiocese of Bamenda. Cameroonian priests are lending a helping hand to the bishop of Portsmouth. That is the increasing trend today and I strongly believe that Christianity will continue to grow. It is one religion that has shown, through its social programs (education, health, etc), it goes beyond the religious transformation of the individual to the very core concerns of the believer.

What do you make of such numbers, and what is their significance for the continent?

These numbers indicate the trend. Christianity is in African to stay and grow. This growth is probably based on the common ground that Christianity shares with African religions. Long before the arrival of Christianity on the African continent, the problem of the "unknown," that is, life after death, was a real issue. Fundamentally, African ethical reflections highlighted not only the concept of good and evil, but also apportioned reward to good and evil after death. Among the Kom people in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, good people had a better life after death. They were believed to die and go to fertile soil or somewhere the good ancestors do not have to toil. Bad or evil people were expected to end up in unfertile red soil where nothing grew. When the missionaries began to preach about heaven and hell, many understood the correlations. Conversion was much easier even though some of the cultural values found contradictions in Christianity. The good thing was that polygyny was optional and more economical. Christianity insisted on monogamy and discouraged polygyny, something that Islam exploited. Islam's exploitation of human nature and human instinct seems to attract many Africans but the economics of it have little or no hold on the well-educated who have come to know that Islam seems to be a plagiarized version of Christianity. [6]

Some observers are critical of the disconnect between African Christianity and African politics, ethics, and social institutions. The same criticisms can, of course, be leveled against the United States as well—particularly now that the cloak of decency and propriety has been ripped off to expose the grotesquely deformed naked truth beneath the self-righteous platitudes of by-gone years. But I would like you to comment on Africa, as an African who has been active in church, society, and academy throughout most of your life. Can you comment on the role played by Christianity in the common good of societies and conventions across the continent?

At this critical moment in the history of Christianity, Africans are disappointed with the moral depravity of the West. The endorsement of homosexuality, the

wanton approval of abortion, and other anti-Christian behaviors of the West leave African Christians wondering whether the missionaries deceived them. The signals coming from the West do not augur well with the emerging brand of Christians in Africa who took everything from the missionaries as gospel truth. With most African cultures, the fundamental belief in the procreative act and the prolongation or the immortalization of the lineage is sacrosanct. Anything that augurs against these principles is to be abhorred. Christianity has been seen and respected because it stood for these and other fundamental truths on which the African community was based. The family and lineage were the sure guarantee of the survival of the human species and, as such, were surrounded by rites and rituals that enhanced and entrenched the sacredness of procreative functions. In the West today, all of this has been reduced to mere banality by pornography and by the excessive commercial and entertainment exploitation of sex and sexuality. The disconnect is the African's incapacity to understand the new signals being sent by the West about the most fundamentals beliefs and this has permitted humanity to get to this point.

You are an active churchman – a Roman Catholic. What do you see as the strengths, weaknesses, and prospects of the Roman Catholic Church in your region and across the continent?

My Catholic faith has been strengthened by my long years of systematic training in the dogmatic teachings of the Catholic Church. I was born into the Catholic faith through my Catholic parents who ensured I was baptized when I was barely two weeks old. One of the major strengths of my Christianity is the fact that it is based on history and tradition. Jesus the Christ was a historical figure and the church he founded took its inspiration and growth from the apostles and disciples whose successors through the centuries have brought us this salvific message in successive ranks.

One of the weaknesses of the Catholic Church has been its inability to bring back the union Christians once enjoyed before the Reformation. What would Christianity have been like without its hundreds and even thousands of divisions? The Catholic Church believes very strongly that the church is both human and divine. It is sometimes the human aspects that divide and separate us. Its divine nature continues to radiate in our modern era through the leadership of convinced Christians. The Catholic Church acknowledges the need for Christian unity and that is why in January of each year, special days are reserved to pray for, work for, and celebrate Christian unity.

The prospects of the Catholic Church in my country and in Africa as a whole seem very bright. A few decades ago, the Catholic Church organized the

Synod of African Bishops chaired by St. John Paul II which produced a synodic document entitled "*Ecclesia in Africa*" (The church in Africa). The document acknowledges the need to understand the cultures of Africa in order to better tailor the gospel message to languages that are culturally African. The whole concept of "inculturation" highlights the notion that Africans have many cultural values and norms that ought to be accepted and used for the spread of the gospel. All major seminaries in Africa teach African anthropology. Since 1978, I have taught African anthropology and a basic training in theology and Christology in Major Seminaries in Cameroon. Coupling this with my advanced training in cultural anthropology, I have attempted to teach future priests about the strengths and pitfalls of incorporating indigenous culture into Christian teaching. It is a tough assignment, but worth it if we are to bring values and good norms into our catechesis.

What role does or can African Christianity play globally, through its missionary activities, yes, but especially through the African diaspora to every continent on the planet (with the exception of Antarctica!)?

As I said earlier, Africans will have to re-Christianize the West. While the West is drifting away into scientific paganism, Africa must demonstrate to the West that the science part of western culture should present a better platform for preaching the gospel. I was really amazed when the first man to land on the moon was able to assert, in flight, that there is a God. The progress of science should lead to a better discovery of God rather than to a denial of his existence. As African Christianity continues to integrate God into its basic cannon, Africa will show the way for the rest of the world.

In visiting and traveling on five continents, I have found African churches filled with faithful worshipers while churches that abound in Europe and the U.S.A. go empty. One Sunday in Harare, Zimbabwe, I went to church and could not find a seat. On a visit to the University of Leiden in Holland, I attended a mass with barely 30 worshipers. I spent a whole morning in Bangkok looking for a Catholic Church and, when I finally found one, it was made up a few foreigners, mostly Africans and a handful of American service men. On a visit to Bali in Indonesia, I was able to find a church at last but was amazed at the number of Buddhists temples. My visit to Ghumeng in China convinced me that Christianity has a long way to go. I could not find a church but I was taken to village whose god was believed to be a monkey.

These experiences suggest to me that missionaries did a good job of spreading the gospel, and were probably aided by the colonial policy that saw religion as a handmaiden of the process of colonial domination.

Can you give readers your perspective on some of the greatest challenges facing the church in Africa specifically, and the entire continent generally, in the century ahead?

The greatest challenge to the church in African is secularism. It seeks to demystify and undermine basic Christian truths such as the existence of God. Secularists use science to demonstrate that Christians—especially *African* Christians—are ignorant.

The rollback of Islam in Africa is also one of the greatest challenges facing African Christians. Islam exploits our basic human nature and appeals to its inner recesses. Islam certainly attracts young Africans who are seeking God as they drift away from traditional religious beliefs. As radical Islam spreads throughout Africa and the world, we followers of Christ need to make an extra effort to roll back this religious virus that threatens us all.

As a Catholic, my greatest concern has been the rapid spread of fundamentalist Christians and the monetary value they attach to preaching the gospel. I speak of what is commonly known as the "success gospel." For example, there are over 70 evangelical churches in my home city with its population of 800,000 people. Every little corner has an evangelical center providing all kinds of visions and strange interpretations of the biblical teachings. Their impact on the mainstream churches is enormous, leading many within my Christian circles to ask, "Is the end near? Is Christ coming back soon?" Is this the fulfilment of Christ's prophecy that "before I come many false prophets will come in my name" (Matt. 24:10-11)?

Paul, like me, you are now a senior leader—in your case spiritual, academic, and intellectual—with most of your allotted years behind you. What are your deepest wishes for Africa of the future?

For me, Africa has a great future. Its enormous human and physical resources constitute the basis on which this future lies. Now, just imagine the millions of Africans who were taken into slavery and who helped develop powerful economies. Imagine how much more can be accomplished in the future with Africans taking their destiny seriously and planning for a more constructive future.

My greatest fear is the western conspiracy never to leave Africans alone to take their destiny into their own hands. Great economies that need the mineral resources of Africa will never allow Africans to control those resources. History has shown us that any African who attempted to give Africa a sense of pride and independence was marginalized or eliminated: take Nkrumah, Sankara,

Lumumba, Sekou Toure … a few of many, many examples. Failure to eliminate Mandela shows the capacity of visionary Africans to provide a common platform for us humans. Martin Luther King falls within this category of Black leaders through whom I believe God wished to show the unique role each of the races he created had to play for the common good of humanity.

You have been a member of the Advisory Council of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* for several years now. Why, in your opinion, is this project important? Why and how should Africans be engaged with the DACB?

To be honest with you, this is a great project. It offers us Africans the unique role of recounting how thousands if not millions of Africans received the gospel and kept it. Documenting the religious experience of Africans serves as our legacy to future generations. It is important for Africans serving on the Advisory Council to claim ownership and engage in providing financial resources to support the project. It is possible for those members who have authority over congregations to begin to mobilize them so that they make contributions. Our benefactors in the West would be further encouraged if they see our commitment through constructive support of this endeavor.

Endnotes:

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phyllis_Kaberry
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Millicent_Chilver
3. Editor's note. The Bretton Woods Institutions are the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). They were set up at a meeting of 43 countries in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, USA in July 1944. Their aims were ostensibly to help rebuild the shattered postwar economy and to promote international economic cooperation. Good intentions were and are subverted by economic and social ideologies that have, in the end, provided minimal benefits to populations while at the same time propping up dysfunctional systems of resource extraction and human dislocation that have been the ruin of many countries. For an easy to access, credible critique of this well-intentioned but deeply flawed Western approach to "development" (or what the West once referred to as "civilization"), see William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (Penguin 2006).
4. http://www.ruralfinanceandinvestment.org/sites/default/files/1220215106527_CoadyCameroon061908.pdf
5. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casablanca_Group
6. A Christian convert from Islam told me that Mohammed spent time in a Christian monastery and that what he learned about Christianity drove him to establish a new religion. This may be a simplification of the many influences that both Christianity and Judaism had on Mohammed.