

# UNBOUNDED CHRISTOLOGIES: THE CASE OF WIDOWS' CHRISTOLOGY – 'JESUS CHRIST IS BREATH'

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## Abstract

*This article draws upon African widowhood for theological reflection. It shows that experiences of widowhood characterize widows in rural western Kenya as liminal individuals located at a threshold. These widows experience deep loneliness besides other hardships. Further, they feel an existential lack of appeasement of loneliness, which opens up room for the emergence of variant Christologies that are fluid and concern intermediate ('in between') areas of experience. Thus this new dynamic of specific embodied experiences by African widows and the intermediacy they experience create the possibility for widows to see Jesus Christ in a manner which is similarly fluid, shifting, 'in between' and on the threshold. In order to capture this new Christology that is unbounded and creative, through metaphoric theology, "Jesus Christ is breath" articulates who widows in rural western Kenya say Jesus Christ is.*

**Key Words:** Widows; Unbounded Christology, Breath; Widow's Experiences; Embodied Experiences; Feminist Christology; Liminality; Metaphoric Theology

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Experiences of widowhood are varied. Widows are women at the intersections of categories and exposed to multiple subordinate positions.<sup>2</sup> Granted this, widows could be understood as liminal individuals on the threshold and in 'in between'. In this capacity Kenyan rural widows encounter deep loneliness which is attested to in this study. This article seeks to interrogate the kinds of Christologies that may emerge from this liminal position. Further, it will show that widows' Christologies are unbounded, fluid and on the threshold. Such Christologies may best be captured through metaphors such as 'Jesus Christ is breath.'

This article shall attend to the theoretical perspective of liminality and how it is applicable to widows in rural Kenya. From fieldwork data the article shall present widows' experiences, with particular emphasis on their experience of deep loneliness. Further, it shall give widows a voice by localising their experiences within a particular context for Christological reflection. This shall serve the purpose of enlarging the data for theological reflection by attending to the norm for women's experiences. Consequently, this article

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a section reworked from a PhD manuscript, Maseno, Loreen. 'Widows' Christologies: A Preliminary feminist analysis of Abanyole widows' Christologies considering kinship, gender and the power of naming'. Oslo: Unipub AS, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The category, 'women's experiences' cannot entirely subsume 'widow's experiences'. Therefore, 'women's experiences' in feminist theory must be localised within a specific context.

turns to Christologies that emanate from widows in rural Kenya and the metaphors that best capture such unboundedness.

### **African Women's Experiences versus African Widow's Experiences**

Some characteristic assumptions and commitments have been considered as being fruitful for theological reflection labelled feminist. According to Rosemary Ruether, "The uniqueness of feminist theology is not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of women's experience, which has been almost entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past."<sup>3</sup>

The experience of women is regarded both as a norm and source for feminist/African women's theological reflection. Other sources for feminist theology include historical culture and the Bible. However, the theologians Paula Cooley<sup>4</sup> and Rebecca Chopp<sup>5</sup> argue that there is a lack of theory on their experiences that can balance the current stock of feminist theories about women's experiences.

In looking at women's experience as a source and norm for African women's Christology, arguments are presented at two levels. First, the notion of normativity is used to reflect the historical voice of women on behalf of women. Second, the data for theological reflection need to be enlarged.<sup>6</sup> This second argument is taken further in the successive parts of this article.

Women's experience is a problematic category in feminist theory. It is often argued that such a reference presupposes a stable female nature which is one and universal. At the same time, it is sometimes unclear in feminist discourses whether the experiences referred to are 'inner experience' or 'outer experience'. Though this remains problematic, I propose to localize what we refer to as women's experience, taking note of the various contexts of women.

I introduce 'widow' as a new field which calls for an even further differentiation from the category 'African women'. This new field ought to be understood as a departure from versions of gender essentialism that have defined women as a single group. This article shall steer a middle course by consistently engaging both empirical and theoretical studies that use finer subdivisions of categories.

So far, African women's theology has maintained the large category of 'African women', thereby accepting uncritically large group boundaries for its purposes of evaluation. Such a perspective fails to account for lived experience at 'neglected points' of

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<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Ruether. *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. USA, Boston: Beacon Press, 1983:10.

<sup>4</sup> Paula Cooley. *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Chopp. 'Theorizing Feminist Theology'. *Horizons in Feminist Theology*. Chopp, R, and S Davaney (eds.). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997:230.

<sup>6</sup> Sheila Davaney, 'Continuing the Story, but Departing the Text: A Historicist Interpretation of Feminist Norms in Theology'. *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*. Chopp, R, and S Davaney (eds.). USA: Fortress Press, 1997:200-201. For this study, my sample population consisted of a total of 16 widows who were practising Christians. Besides them, I conducted successive in-depth interviews, attended church services with some of them and also had focus group discussions with some of them. The ages of the 16 widows with whom I worked varied from 27 years to 77 years, thus spanning an interval of 50 years. In this population the duration of their marriages varied from 3 to 42 years. The number of children ranged from 2 to 10, and one widow had none. 11 widows lost their spouses between 2000 and 2004 while the other 5 lost their husbands earlier.

intersection and experiences which often bring forward multiple subordinate locations for research purposes. This is the novelty that the concept of the 'widow' presents in this study.

In order to enlarge the data for theological reflection on African women I incorporated methods and approaches from ethnography and sociology. I engaged extensively in the social life of widows in rural Vihiga. I lived in the community for three months, observing behaviour, listening to and engaging in what was said in conversations and asking questions. I sought to understand the culture of the people in the area and the widows' behaviour within the context of the Abanyole culture. Thereafter, I wrote up accounts of that setting and my interactions.<sup>7</sup> The Christian religious widows involved in this study will be shown as producers of Christologies, which are theirs, are useful to them and by which they live. The data gathered in this way served to inform scholarship in theology, gender studies and anthropology.

### **Widhood and Liminality**

In order to 'see' Abanyole widows, it is not enough to use terms such as 'a bereaved woman', 'an African single woman', 'a rural African woman', or even 'a poor African woman'. Rather, widows here occupy an intersection, a new space and place, unique since it displays a variety of modes of oppression and possibilities of empowerment. Consequently, this article will proceed to characterise the life conditions of widows as liminal.

For the purpose of this section, I dwell on widows as a subset of the group of rural Kenyan women.<sup>8</sup> The word liminality is etymologically derived from the Latin word, *limen*, 'threshold,' and as such associated with marginality. From Van Gennep's important work, Victor Turner exemplified and reformulated liminality, where he brought into sharp focus the 'statuslessness' of initiation subjects. Turner focuses his attention on rites of passage which tend to have well-developed liminal periods, such as initiation rites into cult membership or social maturity with well-marked and protracted marginal or liminal phases.

To Turner:

The subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally if not physically, invisible... The transitional-being or liminal persona is defined by a name, and by a set of symbols... The structural invisibility of liminal personae has a two-fold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified.<sup>9</sup>

The liminal person is 'in between', being transitional, and can be said to be occupying a fluid place within the social structure. Liminality introduces ambiguity, paradox and confusion of all the customary categories and the resulting status challenges the logic of dualistic classification systems.

Turner also explains that:

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<sup>7</sup>Due to my involvement with primarily widows in my field area, I opt to call my field work a feminist ethnography which focuses on particular aspects of the community.

<sup>8</sup>An ethnography arising from fieldwork in rural Kenya among widows gives further details of the study among widows. Of the widows in my sample 13 were Anglicans, 1 was a member of a Pentecostal Assembly, 1 from an African indigenous Church, and 1 was a Catholic. Maseno-Ouma, L. (2014). *How Abanyole African Widows Understand Christ: Explaining Redemption Through the Propagation of Lineage*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.

<sup>9</sup>Victor Turner. 'Betwixt and Between: the Liminal Period in Rites de Passage'. In: *Sosialantropologiske grunntekster*. Ed. by Eriksen, T. H. (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1996), 510–511.

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (threshold people) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial.<sup>10</sup>

Turner points out that liminal people introduce the possibility of slipping into a new structure and back into the old. They are therefore neither here nor there, thus, they cannot be pinned to one position and can be characterised by anonymity. But the concept liminality has been reworked by other scholars who have applied it in various ways. The anthropologist Mary Douglas uses liminality to denote 'matter out of place': her usage stems from classifications that define people and objects, hence exclude liminal people or objects who subsequently fail to fit in the classificatory categories which society constructs, hence dirt and pollution is attached to these people or objects.<sup>11</sup>

In the same vein, the anthropologist Karin Harsløf Hjelde applies liminality to young refugees.<sup>12</sup>

When doing his study in the hills of West Sepik District, New Guinea the anthropologist Gilbert Lewis applied the concept to the sick.<sup>13</sup> In sum, the examples above indicate how selected authors have used the concept liminality productively to characterize the life conditions of the sick, sufferers of chronic pain and refugees.

In this article, the concept of liminality is used to characterize the life conditions of Abanyole widows. I delimit liminality to widows in three senses. Firstly, the widows featuring as the study population are not confined within a single position but may be classified according to various categorisations, revealing the inadequacies of Abanyole kinship classification. Their position is 'betwixt and between', since they are not clearly unmarried single women, nor, according to kinship categories, are they married women. As such, they occupy a fluid place and can easily shift to either status.

Secondly, the widows are marginalised and consider themselves accorded an inferior status when compared to their previous state of being the wife of a living man. Thirdly; they have an 'outsider status'. As widows, they are liminal in this sense because every Abanyole woman should theoretically be in the custody of either her father or her husband. Being under no specific person's custody in either of these lineages they are thus rendered liminal.

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<sup>10</sup> Victor Turner. *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*. (Manchester: University Press, 1969:95.

<sup>11</sup> Victor Turner, *Betwixt and Between*, 512.

<sup>12</sup> Karin Hjelde, *Diversity, Liminality and Silence: Integrating Young Unaccompanied Refugees in Oslo*. University of Oslo (PhD Thesis), 2004:92-95. For her, the life situation of young unaccompanied refugees could best be understood as marginal, according to both Van Gennep's and V. Turner's applications. She maintains that the concept liminality for these young refugees is fruitful since they are between and betwixt belonging in any part of society and constantly moving.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Jackson, 'Stigma, Liminality and Chronic Pain: Mind-Body Borderlands'. *American Ethnologist*, 2005:32, 332-338. According to Lewis, sick people are liminal beings since they occupy a transitional phase between two normal states, health and death. For him, the sick are separated from normal social life and the sick person may acquire a negative aura. This usage of liminality for the sick has been taken up and developed more recently by Jean Jackson, who did ethnographic research among people with chronic pain at a pain centre. Jackson maintains that chronic pain sufferers are liminal individuals betwixt and between since they are seen to transgress the categorical division between mind and body and are also marginalised.

## **Widowhood Experiences of Deep Loneliness**

As widows pass through the various experiences, the prominent one is loneliness, since they experience the loss of a significant other. After the demise of their husbands, they are left alone to plan matters, and they wish that their loved one could be present to continue his former tasks. On occasions, during important meetings in the home they find that there is void and then they need to call for an elderly male relative to be there when they want land divided, or when cows are to be taken by their son for bride wealth, etc.

Many widows feel deserted, having no-one to encourage them to continue, and especially when their friends leave them they become desperate. They feel that people who were around them seem to have abandoned them, considering them a burden. It is in the midst of such loneliness that prayers help.<sup>14</sup> This feeling of loneliness could be explained in various ways. It is possible that widows become overwhelmed by day-to-day parenting responsibilities; at the same time, they may feel uncomfortable with old friendships, since they feel uneasy being around married couples with their children and jealous of happy couples who are still together. For some widows, instead of enduring such mixed emotions, they deliberately remove themselves from common activities in order to avoid rejection, thus intensifying their loneliness.<sup>15</sup>

One widow said that it was right after the funeral that people just left her and went away. As for the in-laws with whom she used to interact, they tried to keep away. The wives of her brothers-in-law would start questioning when she received any help from her brothers-in-law and this became a big problem. This led her to realize that Jesus Christ was with her, close to her. According to Mae:

One of the young Pastors told me, 'Sister Mae, you are alone, but you will never be lonely'. I wanted to tell him, 'No. It's just the opposite. I will never be alone – God has promised never to leave me nor forsake me. But I am lonely!'<sup>16</sup>

Another widow had some advice to fellow widows.<sup>17</sup> According to her, widows ought to avoid isolating themselves, because that leaves time for so many thoughts, especially for widows who were financially dependent on their husbands. To her, widows need to take time to pray and read the Bible, say the books of Psalms and Proverbs.<sup>18</sup>

Another widow said that it was very difficult when she fell ill, which happened often, as medical treatment requires money. In her misery over this, as she goes to bed to sleep, she prays:

Lord, it is You who will thoroughly examine me, touch me and keep me today. I have no one else who can do this for me.

She then added:

After that prayer, I think that I may not wake up the next day; but the next day, I just find that I have woken up and have some strength. The Lord has strengthened me and breathed in me.

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<sup>14</sup> These examples are derived from parts of conversations with widows during fieldwork.

<sup>15</sup> Mae, Reggy-Mamo. *Widows: The Challenges and the Choices*. Nairobi, Kenya: Salamta, 1999:74-76

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>17</sup> This information was obtained in a focus group with several widows.

<sup>18</sup> My reading of this advice from one of the widows is that the Books of Proverbs and Psalms are preferred by some widows, because they embody symbolism and imagery for God. This is a possible area for inquiry in another study.

This widow has been on and off medication for a while. She missed some meetings and explained to the group of other widows that she had been unwell. She expressed her daily experience of being near death, that her daily retiring to bed may be her final action in this life. Her prayer tells us that she is conscious that she could be a breath away from another state and that lingering in her mind is the possibility of not reawakening. But just how does this widow live this way? On whom or on what does she rely to cope with the reality of her daily existence?

It is inevitable that from her prayers we get a glimpse of her ideas about divinity. Indeed, when asked who Jesus Christ is to her, she stated:

There are times I can be weak and my children take me to hospital and after that I get some strength to walk. Jesus is my guardian because after I cry, if I die, how shall this home be? Jesus treats me through the doctors and I get some health. I then try to do the work that I was doing.

This widow names Jesus as a guardian whom she cries to when thoughts of death emerge. She is convinced that Jesus treats her and grants her wellness and wholeness through the doctors. She exhibits her dependence on Jesus, who sustains her by breathing in her and granting her daily life. This sustenance is a daily breath of life, and this widow is convinced that she arises each morning having some strength due to daily breathing of the divine into her, granting her inner strength together with wellness.

As such, she relates to Jesus as the One to whom she cries. Jesus is close enough to hear her cry, treat her and be everything to her. This widow stated that Jesus has to be everything and ever-present to her, even as she is convinced that the breath of life she has daily is not from herself.<sup>19</sup>

### **African Women's Christologies**

This section considers the Christologies expressed by widows in Kenya and how these resonate in part with other Christologies expressed by African women theologians in Africa. Feminist Christologies have progressed in leaps and bounds. Lisa Isherwood asserts that feminist Christology is positioned within a liberative approach where the concern is how one's understanding of the life of Jesus can help alter present circumstances and how one may be empowered to fight for change. To do this, the starting point is the lived realities of women and men, then biblical stories and other forms of literature are added to the reflection in order to find ways ahead.<sup>20</sup>

The widows understood and expressed Jesus Christ as their friend, their keeper, provider, healer, life giver and close kin. These Christologies do resonate with what African women theologians also indicate. Several women theologians on the African continent have given names to Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> Primarily but not exclusively, Mercy Oduyoye,<sup>22</sup> Nasimiyu Wasike<sup>23</sup>, Teresia Hinga<sup>24</sup> and Teresa Okure<sup>25</sup> show us that Jesus Christ is significant to

<sup>19</sup> The terminology of breath arose during our conversations and remains useful for unbounded Christologies.

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Isherwood. *Introducing Feminist Christologies*. London: Sheffield Academic Press. 2002:11. Here Isherwood is prioritising life experiences of women and men for Christology before biblical stories.

<sup>21</sup> I make an immediate leap into feminist/African women's Christology and deliberately circumnavigate hundreds of years of doctrinal tradition by avoiding the subtle changes and nuances inherent in the history of Christian tradition.

<sup>22</sup> Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Nasimiyu, Wasike. 'Christology and an African Woman's Experience'. *Faces of Jesus in Africa*. Shreiter, R (9th ed.). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005:70-81.

many Christian women in Africa. They proceed variously on the theme of Christology and apply new perspectives to Christological reflection in Africa.

Teresia Mbari Hinga shows how in the African's woman's Christology, the perceptions of Christ include Christ as a personal friend who helps African women bear their grief, loneliness and suffering. Another perception of Christ is that of an iconoclastic prophet who stands out as a critic of the status quo, an image often found within African Independent Churches.<sup>26</sup> For Okure, African women's description of Jesus as mother derives from the cultural view of the woman as the embodiment of life, the one who gives birth to life. Indeed even the continent Africa is fondly called 'Mama Africa'.<sup>27</sup> Jesus is a nurturer of life, especially the life of the weak. Jesus' motherhood is characterized by nourishment, protection and care for the poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed and the marginalized.<sup>28</sup>

For Nasimiyu, the African women's experience calls for a Christology that is based on a holistic worldview. She needs a Christ who affects the whole of her life. Nasimiyu points out Christological models that emerge in African women's reflections as being eschatological, anthropological, liberating and cosmological.<sup>29</sup> In general, according to Nasimiyu, for African women, "Jesus Christ is the victorious conqueror of all spiritual forces; He is the nurturer of life and totality of their being. Christ is the liberator of the sufferers, the restorer of all those who are broken, the giver of hope and courage to be".<sup>30</sup>

African women's theology draws much from context and experience, thus it is not remote and removed from daily living. As such, there are unique experiences and insights that come from individuals such as widows in their contexts. In general, the life experiences of widows, which differ in certain ways from the master category, 'women', inform their understanding of the person of Christ. The female theologians referred to above attest to the fact that Christologies on the African continent are multiple. Some reflections on widows' Christologies are described subsequently.

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<sup>24</sup> Teresia Hinga, 'Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa'. *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*. Oduyoye, M, and K Kanyoro (eds.). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992. See also Teresia Hinga, 'An African Confession of Christ: The Christology of Legio Maria Church of Kenya.' *Exploring Afro-Christology*. Pobee, JS (ed.). Bern: Peter Lang, 1992.

<sup>25</sup> Teresa Okure, 'The Global Jesus'. *Cambridge Companion to Jesus*. Bockmuehl, M, (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Teresia Hinga, 'An African Confession of Christ: The Christology of Legio Maria Church of Kenya.' *Exploring Afro-Christology*. Pobee, JS (ed.). Bern: Peter Lang, 1992.

<sup>27</sup> Teresa Okure 'The Global Jesus'. 242-243. To her, the explosive manifestation of faith in the global Jesus proclaimed in the gospel is evidenced among the evangelical and charismatic churches in Third world countries. In these circles Jesus is seen as a worker of miracles, Lord and Master, victor over sin and a personal saviour.

<sup>28</sup> Loreen Maseno. 'Gendering inculturation in Africa: A discussion of three African women theologians' entry into the inculturation scene.' *Norwegian Journal for Missions*. 2004 4:71-72.

<sup>29</sup> Nasimiyu, Wasike. 'Christology and an African Woman's Experience', 72. Following interviews conducted by Nasimiyu about women's experiences in relation to Jesus, several factors emerge. These include, their Christian concepts of Jesus which they learnt from their catechism, their holistic view of life where Jesus affects the whole life, their belief in the reality of evil powers from which Jesus has to save them and the courage to suffer and endure hardships with the hope that soon all these will be over.

<sup>30</sup> Nasimiyu, Wasike. 'Jesus and an African Woman's Experience'. *Jesus in African Christianity*. Mugambi, J and L Mageza (eds.). Nairobi: Initiatives Publication, 1989:133-134.

## Widows' Christologies

My method of social research was to place the lived experience of Abanyole widows at the centre of my theological task and reflection<sup>31</sup> as the source of theology in my work, thereby moving beyond traditional theology, which is often controlled by the dominant group. This made it possible for the widows with whom I worked to be self-defining and to give fresh answers to the Christological question, 'Who do you say I am?' Through their particular lenses, due to their social contexts, widows invite us to meet Jesus Christ in various ways.

African women's Christology as currently expressed may not entirely subsume widows' Christology,<sup>32</sup> which tends to prioritise Jesus Christ as ever-present, and this originates from a different way of knowing beyond the binary oppositional categories. The widows interviewed for this study describe Jesus Christ as so close and real to them that even as they sleep, they know that Jesus Christ is with them.

This closeness is not physical nor temporary, such as can be obtained from a human friend. Rather, as these Christian widows struggle with their thoughts and anxieties, they experience Jesus Christ as being with them, thinking through these issues with them, with a closeness that is difficult to verbalise or even attempt to capture using limited language.

Widows describe Jesus Christ as sustaining, not being completely 'the other', nor the very same as themselves, but their language emphasises his closeness. There is need to develop language that would capture this embodied phenomenon and the widows interviewed resorted to the means of metaphor.<sup>33</sup>

According to Kaufman, Christ has been narrowly defined as a result of the exclusive association with Jesus.<sup>34</sup> Constructive theology and feminist theology intersect in that they approach theology as an imaginative construction.<sup>35</sup> Sallie McFague works with metaphors and models that challenge and critique orthodox traditions.

According to McFague:

A metaphor is a word or a phrase used inappropriately. It belongs properly in one context but is being used in another: the arm of the chair, war is a chess game, God the father... Increasingly, however, the idea of metaphor as unsubstitutable is winning acceptance:

<sup>31</sup> Further discussions can be obtained from Maseno-Ouma, L. *How Abanyole African Widows Understand Christ: Explaining Redemption through the Propagation of Lineage*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> See Charles Fensham who suggests that together with Sally McFague's metaphor of the earth as God's body, creation as child of God provides a powerful sacramental image for contemporary Christian communities to work towards the wholeness of the earth. 'The sacrament of the first child of God: a renewed Christian Eco-imaginary.' in *Scriptura* 2012:3 111:324. Metaphoric theology is not new within the circles of constructive theological methods. Constructive theological method values pluralism by valuing critical approaches to theological reflection. Theologians such as Gordon Kaufman maintain that constructive theology brings into being what has not been there before. As such, theology is an activity of human imaginative construction and is impossible without employing symbols, metaphors, models and theories.

<sup>34</sup> Kaufman's constructive theology is guided by several principles, first: theological assertions cannot be given the advantaged position they once had. Second; theology can no longer be seen as working from an authoritative divine revelation. Third; theologians need to be accountable for all the concepts they use and for every claim they advance. Using these principles, Kaufman proceeds to discuss issues related to humanity, the world, God and Christ. Therefore, he questions the importance of the Chalcedon creed in view of contemporary life and in relation to the world. Kaufman's constructive ideas find a meeting point within the feminist Christology that Sallie McFague espouses. See Shanon Schrein, SW, *Constructivist and Revisionist Feminist Christology in Conversation: Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A Johnson*. Milwaukee: Marquette University. (PhD Thesis), 1995:11-12, 13-54.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 269-272.

what a metaphor expresses cannot be said directly or apart from it, for if it could be, one would have said it directly. Here, metaphor is a strategy of desperation, not decoration; it is an attempt to say something about the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, an attempt to speak about what we do not know in terms of what we do know... Metaphor always has the character of 'is' and 'is not': an assertion is made but as a likely account rather than a definition.<sup>36</sup>

In order to describe widows' unbounded Christology, a plausible metaphor used is Jesus Christ as breath.

### **Unbounded Christology– 'Jesus Christ Is Breath'**

How do widows in Africa cope with deep loneliness? Psychoanalysts explain that there is an 'in-between' intermediate space which all humans have which helps them overcome stressful situations of detachment. Various transitional objects or phenomena allow individuals to come to terms with distress in life. These items may be pets, dolls or objects of religious devotion. These items allow individuals to expand their activity of relating the outer and inner reality.<sup>37</sup>

Using insight from the field of psychology, the void between body and mind may be reached through mapping – by which Coeey means the micro-logical level of human existence that refers to the interaction between body as site and body as sign in the making of the body's significance for human experience and identity. In general Coeey points to the way in which through mapping we can get 'space' in which to dwell meaningfully.<sup>38</sup> This space is the field of human experience that is the centre of human meaning and agency, and has been given different names.

According to the psychoanalytic theoretician Winnicott<sup>39</sup>, this space is 'the in between,' the intermediate area of human experience, an area between the inner and outer reality, a field of human experiencing. The theologian and psychologist Thandeka calls this space 'the embodied self'.<sup>40</sup> According to Thandeka, this space is neither the inner subjective world of human experience nor the outer objective world. Rather, it is a place of engagement characterised by magic, mystery, illusion and creation.

For Thandeka, the space in which we dwell meaningfully is an intermediate area of cooperative space, where contact is experienced as union, and various metaphors may be used to name this space such as air, oxygen, breath of life, stream of life, a tributary and spring of life. To her, intersubjective psychoanalytical theory focuses on the keeping together or apart of the internal and external worlds of experience. Thandeka thus takes us to embodied experiences being more than ideas since they are the felt identity that combines body, soul, mind and others into one unit of lived experiences.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Sallie McFague. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. London: SCM Press, 1987:33.

<sup>37</sup> Thandeka 'The Self between Feminist Theory and Theology'. In: *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*. by Chopp, R, and S Davaney (eds.). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997:89.

<sup>38</sup> Coeey. *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994:119.

<sup>39</sup> Donald Winnicott coined the term *transitional object* to describe how an object is used as a psychological bridge. He pointed out that throughout life the transitional object is often reserved in intense experiencing and this may be linked also to religion and to imaginative living. See Thandeka 'The Self Between Feminist Theory and Theology'.

<sup>40</sup> Thandeka 'The Self between Feminist Theory and Theology', 85-89.

<sup>41</sup> Thandeka 'The Self Between Feminist Theory and Theology', 88.

During a group discussion, a widow told the others to be encouraged, that even when there is no trouble, they needed to get used to knowing that *Jesus is there*. The presence of Jesus Christ was important to these widows, and the assurance that Jesus Christ was with them was very significant. Among all the widows' Christologies that I gathered during fieldwork, the most prominent was that of *Jesus Christ with them*.

One widow declared that the Lord was breathing in her each morning so that she was able to awake from sleep. To the widows involved in this study, Jesus Christ was felt to be ever with them, ever present, and they are incorporated in Jesus Christ into a common life. I have already indicated that this closeness is not the temporary physical closeness, such as proximity to a human friend. Rather, as widows struggle with their thoughts and anxieties, Jesus Christ is with them, thinking through these issues with them. Jesus Christ is close to them, by them, with them, energising them, breathing in them. The concept eludes precise articulation, and I choose to denote it using the metaphor of breath.

In order to capture these Christologies that arise from widows' experiences of loneliness, I take up the metaphor of breath for Jesus Christ, to suggest a vital corporation between widows and Jesus Christ. A sharp description of this intermediate space is difficult and at the same time, widows' Christologies are dynamic. Therefore a plausible metaphor for widow's Christological reflection, is of Jesus Christ as breath. This metaphor does not pretend to preclude or define who Jesus Christ is, but rather represents an imaginative leap across a distance, in order to give both a shock and a shock of recognition.

What the widows feel and explain as their relationship with Jesus Christ is their embodied experience. The conviction felt even when they are in deep sleep, that Jesus Christ is close to them, talking to them, eating with them, giving them inner strength, begs the question of where this Jesus Christ is at any one moment. Is Jesus Christ in them or by them or is with them, through them, around them, over them .....etc? When the widow is being energised or revitalised, where is Jesus Christ while this occurs? When the widow is in deep sleep and unconscious but attests to Jesus Christ being with her, just where is Jesus Christ? When the widow is deep in thought and later admits that Jesus Christ helped her through her thinking, thinking through the issues with her, was Jesus Christ in her or outside her? This is what is difficult to capture using words, and is what is denoted using the metaphor of breath.<sup>42</sup>

The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery depicts the necessity of breath as an image of total dependence upon God. Breath is life and without it, death is inevitable. In considering Jesus as breath as a likely metaphor, it is useful to consider that breath meaningfully evokes God's original connection to all creation, both corporate and individually.<sup>43</sup>

'Jesus Christ as breath' may be understood as that which is sustaining, but which is not fully the other, nor is it the same as, nor is it a totality, but so close. To the widows Jesus Christ is ever with them, ever-present and they are incorporated in Jesus Christ as into a common life with which they share and from which they draw resources and powers. In general, to the widows Jesus Christ is substance, essence, both something and everything, everywhere and in all things.

The 'Jesus as breath' metaphor is not entirely new, however, and has been appropriated in other religions, such as Islam. When considering images of Jesus Christ in Islam and

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<sup>42</sup> A detailed discussion of this is presented Maseno-Ouma, L. *How Abanyole African Widows Understand Christ: Explaining Redemption through the Propagation of Lineage*. NewYork: Edwin Mellen Press, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Ryken, L et al. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1998:120.

particularly in the poetry and meditative discourses of Sufi Maulana Jalal Al-Din Rumi, the theologian Oddbjørn Leirvik points out that Jesus is recognised clearly by his life-giving breath which renews, restores and transforms human life.<sup>44</sup> This resonance may be fruitful for inter-religious dialogue.

## Conclusion

The quest for an African Christology has led to several Christologies which try to interpret in categories of our time, the Christ who meets us in our culture. By opting for ethnography as a method in order to pay attention to how widows account for their lives and how they position themselves in relation to their experiences, it is clear that widows in Africa show us another way of looking at Jesus Christ. They bring to full view the creative and unbounded possibilities inherent in Christology.

The Christology, 'Jesus Christ is breath' helps toward meaningful understanding of African widows and also forms an integral part of their dependence on Jesus Christ for their survival. These widows constructively make alive the possibility for a Christology that is fluid and shifting. Indeed such possibilities may offer ways for further interreligious dialogues among peoples of different faiths.

African women's Christologies emphasise the person, a bounded person with form and shape. As such, boundedness is central in African women's Christological reflection.<sup>45</sup> Widows, however, assert that Jesus Christ is more fluid, on the threshold, 'in between' and shifting. The identified alternative of Jesus as breath affirms the place in widows' lives where definitions that restrict their bodies and restrain their minds lose their hold, allowing for encounters full of life.

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<sup>44</sup> Oddbjørn Leirvik. *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam: Introduction, Survey of Research, Issues of Dialogue*. Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1999:92-94.

<sup>45</sup> Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*. 57-63. See also Nasimiyu, Wasike. 'Christology and an African Woman's Experience', 72-80.

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