

The Gospel and Culture in Africa

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There is no community of faith in the Judeo-Christian tradition, of any generation that has not wrestled with the issue of the relationship of the *gospel* and *culture*. The African Christians, primarily those in the mainline churches, or as Bengt Sundkler calls them the "white mission churches" ¹ tended to emphasize, not only the differences between the gospel and African culture(s), but also to condemn the latter, as if African culture(s) played no significant role in the life of the people, or in the process of propagating the gospel. Consequently African Christians of the mainline churches have tended to maintain the church structures of "mother churches", in the western world.

We also have the African Independent churches, of the so-called, "Bantu churches" ² tradition in Southern Africa, which emerged around the 1920s, who have (*either explicitly or implicitly*) tended to close the gap between the gospel and the African culture. Needless to say that at times the process of *inculturation* might have been done clumsily.

Lately we have had the so-called *Charismatic* churches, or Churches of the Spirit, which seem to denounce African culture of any form, as an attempt to support, not only the supremacy of the gospel over culture, but also the purity of the gospel. For such Christians, the purity of the gospel is as it is given in the "written word of God" -- the Bible -- where the assumption seems to be that, there is no inkling of the African culture, indeed no influence by any culture.

It may not be a question of who is right and who is wrong. Neither is it a question of the "purity" of the gospel, nor of "syncretism," as some would like to believe. However, the point is, as Christians, the gospel without culture is unidentifiable, indescribable and incommunicable. To deny the relationship between the gospel and culture is to deny the doctrine of the incarnation. It is a denial of the teaching, "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us," (John 1:14). The Word of God immersed himself in the Jewish culture, even to the extent that he was buried "in accordance with Jewish customs," (John 19:40).

¹ Bengt G. M. Sundkler, Bantu Prophets in South Africa (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948), 53.

² Ibid.

Maybe we need to take another good look at the relationship of the gospel and culture. In a number of African countries mothers carry their babies on their backs.

In Zimbabwe they use a specially tailored cloth called *mbereko* to keep the child warm and in a comfortable position. Many mothers have to hold and play with other mother's babies when they enter a house where other women are present; they happily share in the holding of the babies. When a mother is asked by another mother to hold her baby, the mother brings down the baby from her back in the *mbereko* and hands it over to her. Upon receiving the baby, the recipient re-arranges the baby to make sure it is comfortable. If the weather is warm, the recipient strips the *mbereko* off. If the baby needs more warmth, the *mbereko* is wrapped more closely. Above all, the baby must be comfortable on the lap of the recipient for both to enjoy each other.³

It follows that for the communication of the *good news* of Jesus Christ from one Christian community to any other people is a continuous process of the *incarnation* or *repackaging* of the gospel for the sake of the new recipients of the gospel. Yet, the gospel - like a baby going from one pair of hands to another - remains "the same yesterday, today and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

Thus, the portrait of the risen Christ will have to be painted afresh by cultural brushes of the beholder. That is why, in the western world they paint the portrait of Christ with long nose, blue eyes, and long hair. In Africa, the portrait of the risen Christ should include flat nose, brown eyes, and short-woolly hair. I am reminded of the words of Cardinal Otunga of Kenya, who is reported saying:

The ancient idea that God has scattered 'seeds of the Word', wherever people seek him should lead to a new sensitivity on the part of those who have to witness to the Christian message, for from those seeds new flowers can bloom, flowers that have never been seen before in the Church's garden, and which can add something rich and lovely to the universal Church.⁴

Cardinal Otunga is reported to have gone on saying:

³ John Wesley Z. Kurewa, The Church In Mission (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 173.

⁴ Brian Hearn C.S.Sp., The Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops 1977: Ecumenical and Missionary Aspects, p5.

The theological basis for the 'inculturation' of the Christian faith is nothing other than our belief in the incarnation: just as God became one of us so that we might come to know him more clearly and respond to him more lovingly, so the message of his life, death, and resurrection must be made 'incarnate' for people in their own culture.⁵

While the gospel is divine and invitational by its nature, culture is human response, and plays a significant role as a communicating agent, because, also by its very nature, culture is communication.

Defining the terms Gospel and Culture

It is important that we define the meaning of the terms *gospel* and *culture*.

The Gospel

According to Walter Brueggemann, "The noun 'gospel,' which means 'message' is linked in the Bible to the verb 'tell-the-news' (one word, *bissar*, in Hebrew). At the center of the act of evangelism is the message announced, a verbal, out-loud assertion of something decisive not known until this moment of utterance."⁶ Or as W.R.F. Browning says, the word gospel is the English word which "means 'news of joyful events' and is used by Jesus as he proclaims the coming of the Kingdom (Mark 1:15) and by Paul of God's work done through Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1-2)."⁷ The good news that Jesus announced to his hearers was that, the kingdom of God, or the reign of God that Israel had been waiting for, had come or was near. Consequently he appealed to his hearers to "repent and believe the *good news!*"

In order to demonstrate the nearness of the coming kingdom of God, that he announced to John, who was in prison, Jesus replied:

'Go back and report to John what you here and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. (Matt. 11:4-5).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 14.

⁷ W. R. F. Browning, *A Dictionary of The Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 155.

To his critics, Jesus replied, "But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you," (Luke 11:20). For Jesus, the good news embodied in him was both proclamation and serving people, especially, the marginalized - the poor, sinners, children, women, and many others. That is what made his whole ministry *good news*, or 'joyful events' to those who heard or met him. It was those, especially, who for one reason or other could not afford going to the temple, who "listened to him with delight," or gladly (Mark 12:37).

For Paul, the *gospel*, or *good news*, or the *message* to the world is God's Son (Rom. 1:3) - Jesus Christ, who assumed human nature as a descendent of David "and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). No wonder, to the church of God in Corinth, Paul says, "but we preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). What is even more important for Paul, is that this gospel is "the *gospel* of God" (Rom. 1:1). It is all about what God accomplished through his Son: "reconciling the world to himself through Christ" (2 Cor. 5:19); and demonstrating his love, in that "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). That is the gospel that Paul communicated to the world.

The only difference between the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth and that of the early church is that, the proclaimer of the kingdom became the proclaimed in the early church. He is the good news to the world.

Culture

Culture is defined as, "That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."⁸ In other words, "Culture is everything which is socially learned and shared by the members of a society."⁹ It is everything that an individual has learned as a member of a family, community, ethnic group, religious group - it represents all our social heritage, without which it is difficult to talk of our own identity. Culture is dynamic and not static. It is always changing.

⁸ Paul B. Horton and Chester L. Hunt, *Sociology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 51.

⁹ *Ibid.*

When Christianity came to Africa, the missionaries thought of propagating the gospel and their western culture simultaneously. They spoke of *evangelizing* and *civilizing* the African people. They were determined to offer Christ, who was packaged or clothed in western clothes. Today, what a delight it is to my soul to have an African portrait of Jesus in my home – a black Jesus with flat nose, brown eyes, black and short, woolly hair. My soul responds with a sense of authenticity and affirmation, that indeed God, in Christ, has broken into my cultural world.

A number of things happened when Christianity first came to Africa, from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. First, there was outright condemnation of the African culture(s), as the work of the devil. For example, new converts to Christianity were given either western or biblical names. Those who tried to insist on maintaining their original African names would not be baptized. The traditional customs for example, of an African Christian man looking after a brother's widow and her children was condemned. The practice was viewed entirely as taking a second wife. Christians were instructed not to associate with their relatives, unless they were Christian, and especially of your denomination. Christians could no longer participate in communal projects that had to do with the whole village or community because such projects were often directed, either by the headman or chief, who might not be a Christian. In other words, the African Christians were taught new ethical values, not necessarily Christian values, which alienated them, not only from their culture, but also from their own people, for whom their ministry was intended. Such alienation of Christians from their own culture and people has deprived even the second and third generations of African Christians from a continuity of understanding and appreciating, not only African culture as heritage, but even more so, the values embedded in the African culture(s).

Instead, the African Christians, in the name of Christ, and also because they belonged to nations that had been conquered and colonized, were taught to adopt foreign values and practices of life, like new names at baptism, foreign ways of conducting marriages, funerals, and many others. Some pastors, to this day, continue fighting against their own people who want some of the meaningful traditional customs included in the burial rituals of their deceased, forgetting that, even Jesus was buried according to the Jewish custom.

Second, African Religion was condemned outright as the work of the devil. Actually, African Religion should have been regarded as

“a custodian”, until the advent of Christ. The missionaries who came to Africa should have taken their lead from Paul, who had discovered the way out. Instead of condemning the Jewish law outright, Paul wrote to the Galatians, “Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith,” (Gal. 3:24 NRSV). Paul uses the Greek word that we need to highlight. He says, “the law was our *paidagogos*”- a Greek word translated custodian, schoolmaster, disciplinarian, or tutor until the coming of Christ. In interpreting what Paul is saying about the role of the law in God’s plan before the coming of Christ, William Barclay writes:

In the Greek world there was a household servant called the *paidagogos*. He was not the schoolmaster. He was usually an old and trusted slave who had been long in the family and whose character was high. He was in charge of the child’s moral welfare and it was his duty to see that he acquired the qualities essential to true manhood. He had one particular duty; every day he had to take the child to and from school. He had nothing to do with the actual teaching of the child, but it was his duty to take him in safety to the school and deliver him to the teacher. That – said Paul – was like the function of the law. It was there to lead a man to Christ. It could not take him into Christ’s presence, but it could take him into a position where he himself might enter. It was the function of the law to bring a man to Christ by showing him that by himself he was utterly unable to keep it. But once a man had come to Christ, he no longer needed the law, for now he was dependent not on the law but grace.¹⁰

Similarly, Clement of Alexandria, who was born in Athens by non-Christian parents, came to Alexandria where he met Pantaenus, head of the Christian school of Alexandria for catechumens in about A. D. 180, whom, at a later date succeeded as head of that school, “would attribute the same role to Greek philosophy,”¹¹ as a *paidagogos*. Clement realized how absurd and catastrophic it would have been “to tell a well-educated catechumen that even the greatest of Greek poets and philosophers were inspired by the devil.”¹² He argued:

Even if Greek philosophy does not comprehend the truth in its entirety and, in addition, lacks the strength to fulfil the Lord’s command, yet at least it prepares the way for the teaching which is royal in the highest sense

¹⁰ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, rev., ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 31.

¹¹ Henry Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, MMLIV), 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

of the word, by making a man self-controlled, by molding his character, and by making him ready to receive the truthGreek philosophy, as it were, provides for the soul the preliminary cleansing and training required for the reception of the faith, on which foundation the truth builds up the edifice of knowledge.”¹³

That is the kind of thinking that the Church, upon coming to sub-Saharan Africa should encourage. It is the kind of thinking that would agree with John Wesley's conception of *prevenient grace* – that God goes before us in every situation. It is important for us never to forget, that it is only the African culture that can colour or define African Christianity for the majority of our people. Christian response to the gospel of Christ by Africans can only be overtly, satisfactorily, and meaningfully expressed through the African culture. As long as the Christian gospel is still packaged in western culture, our human response to God has a defect.

Indeed, every culture is dynamic, and it must always understand its roots. In responding to the gospel of Jesus Christ, churches throughout the world are expected to bring their splendor and honour to God, in their place of worship, and in their own way (Rev. 21:24).

The Gospel and the Rites of Initiation

Under this subheading of my topic, I want to discuss how both African Religion and Christianity have handled their initiation rites for the young people who are ready to join adult life in the traditional society, and the young people who are ready to be received as full members of the Church, respectively. In doing so, I am raising a serious question; that is, whether Christianity cannot learn something from African Religion and African culture in conducting initiation rites in order to communicate the gospel more effectively and more appropriately to the Africans rather than merely adopting the western forms of initiation rites.

1. African Religion and *Initiation Rites*

We need to acknowledge the fact that African Religion is more a teaching religion than a preaching one. African Religion propagates its message through teaching – teaching that reaches out to the whole family, clan, community and chieftainship. In African traditional life, it

¹³ Ibid., 21.

is assumed that all people including at the stages of birth and infancy, puberty and adolescence, maturity and marriage, old age and death – are all on the journey of life. On this journey of life, no one should walk alone; everyone has to keep in the company of others – the family, the clan, and the ethnic group, and so on. In order to facilitate this kind of belief and understanding of “the journey of life” the rites of passage, at each stage mentioned above, which cover the full-life cycle of a normal individual have to be performed.

The term *rite* means religious ritual, “a ceremonial act, or observance in accordance with prescribed rule.”¹⁴ The term *rite of passage* means “a ceremony performed in some countries, and at times when an individual changes his status, as at puberty and marriage,”¹⁵ or “when a person reaches a new status in life, as adolescence, marriage, etc.”¹⁶ The *rites of passage* are a reminder to everyone that life is a journey. According to most of the traditional African societies, as each individual changes status, he or she has to be prepared for the next stage of life. The community is always there to prepare the individual for that next stage.

For purposes of our comparison, we shall look at the initiation rites for young people at the stage of *puberty and adolescence*. The initiation rites are many and are practiced differently in different places. Such initiation rites may also have several symbolic meanings, but basically they are the same. Some communities may have only one rite to mark the initiation event; and others may have as many as three or more to mark the same event. The initiation rites are performed for both boys and girls, with a very wide range of age groups – six to sixteen years of age.

The main purpose of initiation rites in African traditional life is two-fold: circumcision, and instruction.

First, there are communities in Africa that still practice *circumcision* through traditional ceremonies. Today, of course, many parents would rather have circumcision, especially of boys, done by medical doctors in hospitals or clinics. Yet in spite of the availability of hospitals and medical doctors in most of our African nations, there are parents, especially in the communal areas, who still want circumcision for the children performed as a traditional rite – a religious ritual.

¹⁴ *Collins Concise Dictionary* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1978), 648.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Oxford American Dictionary* (New York: Avon Books, 1986), 784.

Again, it would seem most of the women who undergo circumcision, have it done traditionally. No hospitals are prepared to do such circumcision. In a documentary report presented by one of the United Nations Agencies late last year, it was reported there were 46 African countries where circumcision of women is practiced. Although there are countries where traditional circumcision, even for boys, is a thing of the past, the fact remains that there are still African communities that perform these rites traditionally, both for boys and girls. Every community that follows these traditional rituals has people with expertise that enable them to perform circumcision -- men who take care of the boys, and women who take care of the girls.

In describing what circumcision means and symbolizes for one of the ethnic groups in East Africa, John Mbiti says:

The cutting of the skin from the sexual organs symbolizes and dramatizes separation from childhood: it is parallel to the cutting of the umbilical cord when the child is born. The sexual organ attaches the child to the state of ignorance, the state of inactivity and the state of potential impotence (asexuality). But once the link is severed, the young person is freed from that state of ignorance and inactivity. He is born into another state, which is the state of knowledge, of activity, or reproduction. So long as a person is not initiated, he cannot get married and he is not supposed to reproduce or bear children. The shedding of his blood into the ground binds him mystically to the living-dead who are symbolically living in the ground, or are reached at least through the pouring of libation on to the ground.¹⁷

Second, another purpose for conducting initiation rites is to give instruction to the young people who are about to become adults. Parents have to determine that their children are ready for the event, and the community provides the people who give instruction. Moreover, such instruction in the traditional communities is two-fold: (a) There is informal instruction which is life-long. Such instruction begins as soon as the parents believe the child is teachable. At the same time, the parents share the responsibility of teaching the child with the relatives and the whole community. (b) There is a very intensive programme of instruction, which prepares the young people for maturity and marriage. Because circumcision and this intensive instruction are often conducted at the same time, the young people are taken away from their homes from three weeks to three months. They must receive instruction about the meaning and symbolism of the rite

¹⁷ John S. Mbiti, African Religions & Philosophy, 2nd ed., (Guildford and King's Lynn: Biddles Ltd., 1971), 120.

of circumcision. After the rite of circumcision is performed, the young people must be allowed time for the wounds to heal before they return to the village to rejoin their families.

The intensive programme of teaching includes a number of subjects, such as the history of their own neighbouring people and their good neighbouring ethnic groups, in the event they needed outside support. They are taught to be loyal to their own people, and often to be suspicious of people of other ethnic groups. It is here that the teaching of *nepotism* and *regionalism* – two of the greatest enemies of Africa today, is emphasized. The young men are taught to be strong, courageous and always ready to fight for a cause of their family or ethnic group. They are taught about sex, marriage and all related matters. In the past, with some ethnic groups, this kind of instruction was augmented by requesting the boys to hunt dangerous animals; and girls to fetch water from a distant source. This was all done to prepare the young people for adult life and make them realize that the community was with them on the journey of life.

As these young people returned home, after circumcision and intensive instruction, they did so knowing that they were no longer the children of yesterday. Instead, they felt confident that they were men and women of their village received by their communities as adults. They returned ready for the third stage of life - “maturity and marriage”.

The return home is like an experience of resurrection: death is over, their seclusion is ended, and now they rejoin the community as new men and women, fully accepted and respected as such.¹⁸

There is jubilation when the initiates return in the community. In some communities, this jubilation is marked by a warm reception of the initiates by the whole village, accompanied with singing, beating the drum, dancing by the villagers, and a shower of gifts to the initiates from family members. The people who left their villages as young girls and boys return as respected women and men – they are a new people altogether. As young adults they are recognized as ready to bear fruit for their community including the responsibility of reproduction.

That is what African Religion offers for its young people, who aspire to join the world of the adults. Such initiation rites make the occasion not only *memorable*, but also *meaningful* to the initiates

¹⁸ Ibid., 122.

themselves. The rites serve as reinforcement throughout one's whole life. It is not only to prove that one reached a new status, but also that one belongs, is accepted, and has the freedom to exercise one's rights as an adult.

2. Christianity and the *initiation rites*

Assuming that initiation rites in traditional Africa are comparable to baptismal rites, when new members are added to the community, we shall look at what Christianity has to offer to our candidates, who aspire for such *baptismal rites*.

We shall now turn to the baptismal rites, which sees us through to the full membership of the Church. In order to be more concrete to what we are discussing, I have chosen to look at The United Methodist Church teaching concerning the baptismal rites. According to the Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church (Africa Central Conference Edition), "The Christian Community of The United Methodist Church [Local Church] is made up of (1) catechumens, (2) probationary members, and (3) full members."¹⁹ Obviously the aspiration of every catechumen and probationary member is to become a full member of the church. The *catechumen* is defined as "one who has repented of his/her sin, accepted Christ as Savior, and is under instruction for Christian baptism."²⁰ "A *probationary member* is one under instruction to the meaning of full membership in the Church." The Book of Discipline does not tell us, as it does with the catechumens whether a probationer, at that status, "has repented of his/her sin," or not. However, a probationary member could be one whose status originally began as a catechumen, and later on, recommended to the status of probationary member; or could be a probationary member by virtue of having been baptized an infant. According to United Methodism, candidates in the two categories are members, but not yet full members of the church, until they confirm or reaffirm their faith.

The question is: How meaningful, eventful and memorable are the occasions of our *Christian rites*?

First, it is always important to know the *purpose of a rite*. "In every part of the New Testament it appears to be assumed that

¹⁹ The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, Africa Central Conference Edition, 1990), 51.

²⁰ Ibid.

baptism was the universal and essential gate of entry into the Christian community.”²¹ This community is a community of “the people of God,” (Heb. 4:9), which now includes what Peter says, “*Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy,*” (1 Pet. 2:10). Therefore, “in Baptism, entry is opened up to ...the ‘inner circle’ of this kingdom, that is, to the earthly body of Christ, the Church.”²² Baptism is accepting God’s offer of grace in Christ for our reconciliation with God. Baptism means death “*to sin*” or being “*baptized into his death*” or “*buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life*” (Rom. 6:1-4).

Whether one is baptized as an infant or as an adult – it is all God’s claim on those people for himself, and there is “*one baptism,*” (Eph. 4:5). We become members of that body of Christ by the grace of God who reaches out to us, and makes our reconciliation with him possible through faith in Christ. It is all God’s work through his Son, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is God’s gracious activity of claiming those who have faith in his Son to himself. Is African United Methodism or are the African churches of other denominations making that kind of impression on the young people, who want to understand the meaning of their *baptism*?

Second, now that we know that baptism signifies joining or being incorporated into the earthly body of Christ – the Church, *how seriously do African churches take the rites of baptism?* Maybe the Church in Africa has something to learn from its own culture in understanding about certain values in religious rituals, primarily with regards to the intensity with which baptismal rites and its instruction ought to have. At the same time, we are suggesting that the packaging of the gospel in our Christian ceremonies in Africa, need to be coloured more by the African than western cultures.

Third, the African churches may want to learn to *give time for the initiation rites*. The range of time African ethnic groups give to the initiation rites is between three weeks to three months. We have already noted that, with those groups where circumcision is included as part of the initiation rite, *the initiates come back when the wounds have healed*. We need to give ourselves sufficient time with our young people today

²¹ Donald M. Baillie, The Theology of The Sacraments (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), 76.

²² Oscar Cullmann, Baptism in the New Testament (London: SCM Press, LTD, 1964), 34.

who have serious social wounds of child abuse, pregnancies, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, running away from home, lack of school fees to continue school, and many others. We need time with the young people to get close to them, and to enable them time to open up the social wounds they have suffered. They want to share their fears, anxieties and hurts including the hopes and aspirations they have for the future. That close relationship with our young people will enable them the opportunity to become "a new creation" in Christ (Gal. 6:16). They should be given time to dislodge their attitudes of nepotism and regionalism, and supplanted by the understanding that, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ," (Gal. 3:28).

Fourth, there is need to *make baptismal rites as the centerpiece for the whole Christian community*. Traditional people in Africa treat the initiation rites as a community task. This task is not just left to the parents whose teenagers are going to be initiated. In traditional life there are experts to perform the circumcision, and others to give instruction in various areas, and even storytellers are brought in from the community to soothe those who may be in pain after circumcision.

A special retreat prepared for people who are about to be baptized would give an opportunity for the congregation to share their love, talents, expertise and whatever materials they have with their young people. That would give good opportunity to the young people for Bible study and reflection on the history and doctrines of the church. This would give time for them to discuss with their leaders the seriousness of sexually transmitted diseases, drugs, and how they could stay out of trouble. Where parents might be failing to reach their teenagers, the church might be able to assist.

The point I am making is that the traditional forms of the initiation rites could be adopted by the African churches to communicate the gospel meaningfully and effectively rather than imitating foreign forms that have no value for our people and their communities.

The gospel and culture are inseparable companions. They need each other, only that the gospel judges culture. The initiation rites are a means to convey the grace of God through Christ. Because people must necessarily respond when God has spoken, the people can only make their response as humanly as they can – that is, through their culture. Again, the gospel and culture are inseparable companions.