

# INCULTURATION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RECONCILIATORY VALUES

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## Abstract

*The African Traditional Reconciliatory Rites has never been seriously considered as an important area of Inculturation within the African church. Though the need for inculturating both the Gospel and the local church within their cultural environments has been clearly emphasised in recent church documents on Africa, much of their practical applications up to the present moment have been reserved only for Liturgical celebrations (especially the Holy Mass) and Catechesis. This is a clear indication that Inculturation in the African Church has not been far reaching enough. Our objective is to propose a more robust approach to Inculturation that would extend to the other sacraments such as Reconciliation, and possibly, to the totality of Christian life. Our focus is specifically on the area of reconciliation. Our argument is in favour of the traditional model of reconciliation as practised in the different traditional African societies, as cultural ingredients for greater encounter of the sacrament and a true experience of reconciliation within the African church.*

**Key Words:** Inculturation; Traditional values, worldview, Incarnation, and reconciliation.

## Introduction

Inculturation is not just one of the dominant themes in contemporary theology, but also most importantly, when it concerns churches in African, it is considered one of the most relevant issues. It is popularly believed by many theologians, specifically those of African descent and those familiar with the terrain, that it holds the key to the future survival of the Africa Church. Inculturation should take the whole life of the church as its field of operation, and not just concentrate on few areas, such as the Liturgy and the proclamation of the word of God, where some attempts have been made. In the African Church, there is still a significant distance between Christian practice and the cultural life of the faithful with negative consequences on the overall Christian life. It is also believed at the same time that some of the unfamiliar symbols that characterise the present Church's life could be more enriched by the more familiar traditional symbols that could better nourish the lives of the faithful and give the African church new energy and dynamism. The aim of this article is to explore the traditional reconciliatory values as a cultural element that could enrich the ministry of reconciliation in the life of the Church.

## The Meaning of Inculturation

The term inculturation is relatively of recent origin in the theological vocabulary, although the reality which the term designates has been in operation in one form or another



throughout the history of the Church's existence. The word was probably first used by J. Mason, in his book, *L'Eglise ouverte sur le monde* published in 1963.<sup>1</sup> By 1975, the word "inculturation" was becoming common usage, as it entered into the vocabulary of the 32<sup>nd</sup> General congress of the Society of Jesus (The Jesuits), which took place between 1974 and 1975.<sup>2</sup> In the Pontifical Magisterium, the vocabulary appeared for the first time in the "Allocutio" to the Pontifical Biblical commission of the 26<sup>th</sup> arch 1979, and then subsequently officialised in the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter, the word entered into frequent usage.

Inculturation was borrowed from Cultural Anthropology where the term in the form of "enculturation" signified the process by which an individual becomes inserted in his cultures. In changing from its Anthropological form to the Theological form, the word did not merely undergo a change in the prefix "in" but acquired a more profound change both in meaning and applications. As a theological term, inculturation situates itself at the boarder-line between Anthropology and Systematic Theology. By its root culture, it sends us inevitably back to the complex realities of cultures and towards the data of Anthropology. By its prefix, "in", it reminds us spontaneously of the mystery of incarnation, or the *inhumanisation* of the Divine Word.

In its theological sphere, inculturation includes, in its scope, the Christ's event, which is not relevant to Cultural Anthropology, and the human realities in relation to the salvific event in Jesus Christ. Inculturation is carried out when the Gospel message has so penetrated a given culture that it becomes, as it were, the life principle of that culture and now expresses itself through it. However, since the gospel message is never found in the abstract, but comes already laden with elements of different cultures, inculturation takes place therefore, when the group of Christian faithful in a particular locality which has received the gospel, succeed in divesting it of the non-essential cultural packaging with which it was brought, and re-expresses and lives it in the cultural idioms of the locality without compromising the essence of the message.<sup>4</sup>

### **Inculturation in the early Centuries**

The practice of inculturation is not new in the Church. The *Kerigma*, or proclamation of the Good News of Christ is the fundamental trait of the New Testament Church. Right from the origin of the Church, this gospel is adapted to diverse cultural situations of the evangeliser, while the gospel itself was working also within the people and human groups who accept it.<sup>5</sup> From the first time the Gospel was preached outside the Jewish cultural area of its birth, the Church recognised the necessity and has permitted

<sup>1</sup> E. Ikenga Metuh, ed., *African Inculturation Theology: Africanising Christianity*, (Onitsha Imico Books 1996), 7.

<sup>2</sup> « Inculturazione », in: *Dizionario di Missiologia*, (Bologna: Edizione Dehomane, Pontificia Università Urbaniana, 1993), 281.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* (C.T.) 53.

<sup>4</sup> Metuh, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Achiel Peelman, *L'Inculturation et les Culture* (Paris, 1988), 112.



some form of inculturation. The central issue of the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:5) was one of inculturation, and inculturation was the secret of St. Paul's missionary successes; for according to him, "I make myself all things to all men in order to save some at all costs" (1 Cor. 9: 22 - 25).

The first stage of the Church's missionary activities covered principally the geographical areas around the Mediterranean, prevalently in the Roman and *Hellenist* environments. When the Church was in her infancy, growth was brought about through conversion of individuals and family groups. Every Christian felt that to be a Christian implied being an evangeliser, initially not in an organised manner but through word of mouth and by a witness of life - by living the faith and dying for it.

As soon as evangelisation became more organised, the process of inculturation was progressively applied in the evangelisation of the diverse peoples, particularly those outside the Jewish and *Hellenist* environment. Toleration of neutral and naturally good pagan customs (accommodation) was the policy advocated by the early Apologists known as the "Irenics" (the peacemakers or reconcilers) such as Clement of Alexander and Origen. This method is often in contrast to the polemics - the early Christian hardliners.<sup>6</sup> Tertulilian (160 - 230 A.D.) coined the expression "*Testimonium animae naturaliter christianae*" (The testimony of the naturally Christian soul). St. Justin Martyr spoke of "*logos spermatikoi*" the (seed of the Word) that existed in the pagan heart. For Eusabius, pagan Philosophy was a preparation for Christ. He demonstrated a distinctively positive attitude towards non-Christian customs. All these personalities in the early Church signified the early Christians' positive attitude towards pagan customs. The ability of the Gospel and the early Church to accommodate very many diverse peoples was one the factors that led to the phenomenal growth of the Church, and once persecution was removed beginning with the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, the growth of the Christian faith was unparalleled in the history of religions.

The adaptation of pagan customs to the Christian faith was carried out in the evangelisation of the European Continent. When the new era of evangelisation came for the gospel to be taking to distant peoples and cultures, the question of inculturation of the gospel surfaced more forcefully. The instruction of the Sacred Congregation of De Propaganda Fide to the Vicar Apostolic in the Foreign Missions in 1659 reflects the general policy of the Catholic Church right down to Vatican II.

Do not make any effort or use any argument in favour of forcing the people to change their customs or traditions, as long as these are not clearly opposed to religion and

<sup>6</sup> L.J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Culture : New Perspective in Missiological Anthropology* ( New York), 87.



morality. What could be more absurd than to plant France, Spain, Italy or any other country of Europe into China.<sup>7</sup>

The Second Vatican Council, in its Constitution on the Liturgy allowed for a more radical adaptation of the Roman Liturgical Rites to the needs of the people.<sup>8</sup>

Pope Paul VI's address to African Bishops in Kampala Uganda, in July 1969, is a classical description and strong motivation for inculturation efforts in Africa. According to the Pope:

The African Church must be entirely founded upon identical, essential, constitution and patrimony of the same teachings of Christ as professed by the authentic and authoritative teachings of the Church. This condition is fundamental and indispensable. The expression that is in the language and mode of manifestation of this one faith may be manifold. From this point of view, a certain pluralism is not only legitimate, but desirable. And in this sense you may and you must have an African Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

The joint statement of African bishops at the 1974 Synod quoted this call for an African Christianity and added that:

It is essential to foster the particular incarnation of Christianity in each country, in accordance with the genius and talents of each culture, so that a thousand flowers may bloom in God's garden.<sup>10</sup>

### **Absence of Inculturation in the Evangelisation of Africa**

Although Christianity has been in Africa since the earliest centuries, the Christian faith did not spread to the greater part of the continent which lies beyond the Sahara desert. One of the reasons for this was given by Jean-Marc Ela when he wrote:

*The Eastern-style Christianity that developed and endured in the Ethiopian Churches did not spread to the rest of black Africa. Since Christian Ethiopia was subjugated by Egypt and lacked the necessary material resources for its expansion, Ethiopian Christianity, either by choice, or by resignation held to the traditional African tolerance and did not lend itself to religious proselytism.*<sup>11</sup>

In the Mediterranean Africa where the Church flourished for several centuries, the lack of contact between the Church of North Africa and the Berber world and Kabyle culture rendered the faith vulnerable and eventually disappeared almost completely.

<sup>7</sup> Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide, *Collectanea*, Rome, 1907, Cap.4, No.333. Cf. Metuh, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Vatican Council II, S.C., 40.

<sup>9</sup> Paul VI, "Address to S.E.C.A.M", Kampala 1969, in: R. Hickey, *Modern Missionary Documents and Africa*, op. cit. p.210.

<sup>10</sup> Reports on Africa at the 1974 Synod of Bishops, Rome, in: R. Hickey, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> J.M. Ela, *African Cry* (New York, 1986), 10.



leaving only the indigenised Coptic Christians. The *tabula razza* measures adopted by Roman Empire in their conquest of the Mediterranean colonised cities of Hippo and Carthage were aimed at achieving uniformity of language, law, religion, and even dressing - all representing a combined value of Latin and Barbary civilisation. These measures were inherited and approved by Christians who regarded the Roman Empire as the highway to a rapid and smooth expansion of Christianity. Even the highest Church authorities recognised the colonial Roman Empire on this same ground, as the declaration of Pope Leo I in the fifth century bears witness:

*It was especially suited to the divinely prepared work that many kingdoms should be united into the single empire, in order that one general, preached message might reach more rapidly all the peoples that the government of a single town groups together.*<sup>12</sup>

It is on account of this way of thinking that the local cultures of the colonised peoples were easily ignored, if not actually held in contempt. In North Africa, the churches remained profoundly alien to the Berber world and to their Kabylie culture. That is why the churches collapsed along with Roman Empire. In other words, in ceasing to be Latin, Mediterranean Africa ceased to be Christian. In the seventh century, Islam, controlling the lands of the Sudan and the routes of the Mediterranean, would close the Sub-Saharan Africa to the gospel<sup>13</sup>.

### Rejection of African Cultural Heritage

Evangelisation of the African continent has one of the toughest challenges in the history of Mission.<sup>14</sup> It is an undeniable fact that the implantation of modern Christianity in Africa took place mainly during the colonial period. Though Christian evangelisation has always been in its essence the execution of Christ's great commission (Mt.28:19), the missionary movement in Africa came in the context of European adventure and Imperialism. Then subsequent colonial occupation provided sub-Saharan Africa with a similar opportunity the Roman Empire had done for the Mediterranean world in the early centuries, and which the Church Fathers had called *Praeparatio evangelii*, a preparation for, and facilitation of, the spread of the gospel. Under European rule the innumerable ethnicities became easily accessible as tribal frontiers were broken down, new economic infrastructures, new political administrations and especially the improved means of travelling and communication facilitated the work of evangelisation tremendously.

The missionary, unfortunately, was a man of his time and of his country of origin, therefore too often a victim of the prejudices of that time and country. The Directive from Propaganda to missionaries to respect and make use of the local culture in planting the

<sup>12</sup> S. Sempore, "The Church in Africa between Past and Future", in *Concilium, The Churches of Africa: Future Prospects* (New York, 1977), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ela, 10.

<sup>14</sup> John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African History 62 - 1992* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications-Africa, 1994), 92.



gospel would be good enough for the ancient cultures of the Far East, not for black Africa. The European countries had formed an image of the black man which puts him in a position of inferiority.<sup>15</sup> Testifying to this belief, Pere Libermann affirms, for example that: the blindness of the spirit of Satan are too deeply rooted in this people, and the curse of its Father still rests in it; it will have to be redeemed by sufferings, united to those of Jesus .... in order to cancel the curse of God.<sup>16</sup>

When the missionary approached the African, he or she had to struggle against the effects of the distorted gaze which his society of origin made him focus on the black man. In addition, the mission suffered from other handicaps, particularly the impoverishment of Theology at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The evangelisation of Africa was said to coincide with one of the worst periods of the Theology of mission.<sup>17</sup> The missionary arriving Africa was armed with a good will, but badly enlightened by an extremely deficient Soteriology. Possessed of an absolute certainty that outside the Church no one could be saved, he regarded baptism as the saving rite which brought a man out of a state of certain damnation and introduced him into a state of virtual salvation. The "pagan" on the other hand, was for the missionary, and for the Church at the time, the idolater who was not only in error about God, but also a victim possessed by Satan, the inspirer of "pagan" religions and institutions. Unenlightened zeal can however providentially bear fruits, as it is said that God can write straight in crooked lines. The ignorance in matters of local culture, the prejudices and the theological simplicism did not prevent the missionaries from establishing the basis of what constitutes the Church of Christ in Africa today.

### **New Approach Towards Culture in Africa**

If somewhere along the line in the history of the Church, attention was not given to the practice of inserting the message of Christ in the culture of peoples, the Second Vatican Council will usher in a new openness in this regard. The teaching of the Council explains the responsibility of the Church in a given cultural area to adapt and enrich the many forms in which the Christian community expresses, teaches, celebrates and lives the mystery of the faith according to the endowment in which she lives. Vatican II, treating of the eastern Churches as an example, enumerated as principal areas of such inculturation in the life of the Church: the Liturgy, spiritual disciplines and reflections.<sup>18</sup> In the Council Decree on Missionary Activities are found the same elements, with explicitness also, on the necessity for inculturation of the Kerigma and of catechetical teaching.<sup>19</sup> There was however, also in the Conciliar Document, a call to vigilance, to discernment, and above all, to charity in order to strengthen the whole ecclesial communion of the Universal Church.

<sup>15</sup> Sempore, 3. Also read its footnote no. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Cf. G. Goyau, *La France Missionnaire dans les 5 parties du monde*, Paris, 1948, p. 117.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> U.R., 15-17.

<sup>19</sup> A.G., 19-22.



Concerning the African church, the awareness of the necessity for inculturation has been recommended on all major reflections and deliberations on the Pastoral life of the African church. In the Special Assembly of the synod of bishops for Africa which took place in Rome in 1994, the Bishops at the Synod remarked that for the African Christians, the faith had not been received into their culture, and so often live in two separate worlds: the world of the traditional religion and customs, and the world of the Christian faith.<sup>20</sup> Nothing could be more imperative than the words of Pope John Paul II Himself to the African Church:

I put before you a challenge: a challenge to reject a way of living which does not correspond to the best of your traditions and your Christian faith ... Today I urge you to look inside yourself. Look to the riches of your traditions, look to your faith. Here you will find genuine freedom. Here you will find Christ who will lead you to the truth.<sup>21</sup>

The challenge of the Holy Father to the African Church, therefore, is to engage in inculturation to ensure that the followers of Christ enter more deeply into the gospel message, while remaining faithful to all authentic African cultural values.

### **Inculturation in Africa and its Challenges**

A genuine inculturation of the gospel in all aspects of the faith is an imperative for the African church. However, the difficulties in practical terms are enormous and it carries a high level of risk as well. Earlier attempts at inculturation at a deep level proved difficult, apart from issues of peripheral matter. Alward Shorter, referring to the little and insignificant progress made and the obligation to push forward with greater efforts, notes:

At this juncture of the Church's history, inculturation hangs in a balance. Unless a thoroughgoing diversification takes place, it will be a matter of peripheral experimentation, of dispersed projects which have no coherence in themselves, and which are not part of the overall planning or policy. Without doubt, genuine diversification is feared as a possible threat to Catholic communion, but the dangers of postponing it are probably far greater, as the late Fr. Pedro Arrupe S.J. used to point out that the chief danger is probably not one of schism and secession, but of driving inculturation underground and encouraging a parallelism of official and folk Catholicism.<sup>22</sup>

Contemporary missiologists realise that there is no easy or simple way to carry out inculturation, though it is a fundamental duty of the church, and it is urgent. The greatest fear, especially when it concerns Africa, is that of syncretism, as the Vatican Council document clearly warns against "every appearance of Syncretism and false particularism" (A.G.22).

<sup>20</sup> *The African Synod Comes Home: A Simplified Text*, edited by AMECEA Pastoral Department (Nairobi: Pauline Publications-Africa, 1995), 25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 26.

<sup>22</sup> Alward Shorter, *The African Synod: A Personal Response to the Outline Document* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications-Africa, 1991), 64.



However, the Church has surged forward in history by incorporating cultural elements found in the different localities where she had proclaimed the good news, syncretism notwithstanding. "Catholicism, such as it has appeared in history up to our days," wrote Leonardo Boff, "suppose the courage of incarnation, the courage to adapt itself to the heterogeneous elements and to re-mould them according to the criteria of its specific Catholic ethos".<sup>23</sup> Catholicity, a synonym for universality, is only possible and realisable on the condition of not turning her back to syncretism, but to make it, to the contrary, the generator process of Catholicism itself.

It has been clearly observed further that all the big religions, Christianity included, are a result of an immense process of syncretism which is always ongoing.<sup>24</sup> Christianity, such as it is today, is therefore a result of two tendencies that manifest themselves throughout the history of the church: the necessity for maintaining and developing the specific identity of Christianity, and the capacity to embrace the new values that can enrich the Christian ethos. The Church should not fearfully oppose every species of syncretism, but rather engage in a ministry of discernment concerning her proper traditional religious expression and the new religious expression which has just been grafted in the old stem. This openness of spirit is necessary because of the organic unity between culture and religion, especially in non-Western societies such as Africa. The distrust that reigns in the Church concerning syncretism comes in large measure from the artificial distinction that Western Christianity make between culture and religion.

### **Call to a Greater Effort on Inculturation in the African Church**

Sidbe Sempore sounded rather optimistic concerning a meaning progress if efforts are renewed in inculturation in Africa when he said:

If it is true that we are far too caught up in the wrappings of the overseas and pre-Vatican II Traditions which presided over the birth of our churches, we have at least the resources to free ourselves from them. Youth is a source of vitality, and one of the characteristics of our churches is the energy with which they try more or less to incarnate the gospel, and in spite of poverty of our means and the handicaps of every other kind that paralyse our efforts, the joy of living together as brothers and disciples characterise our celebrations and proclaims the primacy of the forces of life. The optimistic energy rests on a traditional cultural substratum – the richness of which is still unexplored, the ever-present vitality of our cultures is something that should serve as a springboard and ally itself with the inherent dynamism of the gospel.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Achiel Peelman, *L'inculturation et les Cultures* (Paris, 1988), p.143. cf. L. Boff, *Eglise, Carisme et Pouvoir* (Paris : Lieu Commun, 1985), 161.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>25</sup> Sidbe Sempore, "The Churches in Africa between Past and Future," *Concillium, The Churches of Africa: Future Prospects* (New York: Seabury Press), 5.



The attempt to incarnate the faith at the heart of the African would entail entering deeply into the traditional world view and then to relate to the aspects of life so various such as the concrete means of conciliating man with the invisible powers and protecting him against occult forces. The means of doing this are through cult of ancestors and intermediary spirits, family structures, marriage customs, initiations, the rites for obtaining and fostering health, the community as the total milieu for life lived in solidarity with others, miraculous interventions of God and deities, etc.<sup>26</sup>

### **Inculturation and the Sacraments**

It is in sacramental practice, in fact, that our churches display most obviously their dependence on foreign mental categories and abstract intellectual thinking alien to traditional African world view. It will remain like this as long as we are obliged to fit ourselves into the rigid framework of the Latin rite. Adaptations allowed in the Latin rites do not go far enough, and the results obtained sometimes borders on the ridiculous. The real adaptation taking place today in many Christian communities is in the celebration of rituals not provided for by the Liturgical books of the Roman Rite. In Africa there are abundant instances of inculturated preaching and catechesis, which, being oral has escaped the kind of scrutiny applied to the Liturgical texts. The homily, for instance is essentially the free composition of the preacher who confers his own style upon it.

The principle of incarnation demands that in our Liturgy, particularly the Sacramental rites, we renounce our too facile rule of uniformity and transposition, in order that Christ might find on our African soil and at the heart of our communities all the human means through which to signify and communicate his salvation. In the field of sacramental Theology and practices, our Churches must make a great effort in order, on the one hand, to discover the profound meaning and purpose of the sacrament in the African context, and on the other hand, to give back life and substance to the different sacraments.

### **The Impact of Traditional World View on Moral Life**

The first thing one realises in traditional African societies is the close bond that exists between religion and social life. The African religion impregnates the whole life of the community. The vision of the world is one of unity, as there is no clear cut distinction between the sacred and the profane, between matter and spirit. In the African view, the living and the dead, the visible cosmos and the invisible world merely constitute one and the same universe. This vision of the world is such that it brings human being face to face with the transcendent. The social, political and economic organisation therefore is in direct relationship with this system of belief and religious representations. One must not underestimate the present day influence of the traditional religion and cosmology which have moulded the African man. Traditional Religion is the source of the unity of the

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 10.



African world. The African society contains in germ their religious unity and makes possible to get over the apparent cultural erosion due to the impact of modernity.

The essence of African morality is based more on the community needs than on abstract moral principles. It is not some sort of a Kantian Categorical Imperative, morality based on any transcendental and spiritual values. It is more of a "morality of conduct" rather than a "morality of being". Traditional African Morality has a distinct communal dimension, as Theophilus Okere would express clearly: "We know of corporate responsibility. We know of corporate sin. Such morality would score several points over the extremely individualistic morality of the present Christian tradition."<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the gregariousness of the Africans manifests itself in countless ways in their patterns of everyday living. The African instinctively seeks community living. This is verified even on the part of the Urbanised Africans, who in spite of their uprooted lives from their primary village communities, seek community life even in their new urban homes. In this case where individuals have been detached from the communities of their homeland, they very often manage to find, or create, a new primary community in the urban areas. This is a surrogate for the extended family, or the community of village neighbours. This may be a church community, or more often, a circle of colleagues, work mates or neighbours belonging to the same ethnic group.

Loyalty and solidarity within the community is given a religious dimension. In certain situations membership of a community may be synonymous with having right on one's side. It may be more or less explicitly believed that one's own group enjoys divine favour, and that others do not. Community membership can become, in this case, a war between good and evil, represented by one's community on the one hand, and the enemies or outsiders on the other hand. Happily, the religious dimension of community is ordinarily expressed through the positive and conciliatory sentiments. The community idea is the maintenance of harmonious relationship, according to pre-determined patterns of structuring society. Nevertheless, the sense that the human experience is essentially a shared experience is expressed in the life-crisis rituals of traditional religious life.

### **The Dark Side of Common Life**

Patrick Mérand, writing about daily life in traditional Africa, said that in an African community, all the inhabitants know one another; they engage one another in a relationship of friendship, but they also learnt to hate one another, make war with one another, etc. Peace and unity is assured between themselves through a common language. But once

<sup>27</sup> T. Okere, "The Assumption of African Values as Christian values," in *Civilization Noire et Eglise Catholique*, (Paris: Presence Afrique, 1977), 288.



there is difference in language, rivalry overtakes cooperation. When there is no communication, there could not be love.<sup>28</sup>

In Traditional African life, evil is real. Within a tightly knit society where personal relationships are so intense and so wide, one finds perhaps, the most paradoxical areas of African life as a type of life which makes every member of the community dangerously naked in the sight of other members. It is paradoxically the centre of love and hatred, of friendship and enmity, of trust and suspicion, of joy and sorrow, of generous tenderness and bitter jealousies. It is paradoxically the heart of security and insecurity, of building and destroying the individuals and the community. Within the intensely corporate type of society, there are endless manifestations of evil, which includes murders, robberies, rape, adulteries, stealing, cruelty, quarrels, bad words, disrespect to persons, accusations of sorcery, magic and witchcraft etc.<sup>29</sup>

However, the pervasive presence of physical and moral evil is given a very religious and spiritual interpretations as Mbiti would say, that every form of pain, misfortune, sorrow and suffering, every illness and sickness, every death whether old or young, every failure of the crops in the field, of hunting in the wilderness, or fishing in the waters, every bad omen or dream, these and all other manifestations of evil that man experiences are blamed on someone in the corporate society.<sup>30</sup> Natural explanations may indeed be found for things that happen, but mystical explanations must also be given.

### **Inculturation as Reappraisal of Traditional Cultural Values**

The neglect of the traditional value system can be considered as one of the main root causes of evil in African life. This neglect is traced back to the encounter of the Africans with foreign value systems. According to Bolaji Idowu, the politics of colonial indoctrination, directly or indirectly, just as the politics of assimilation, has affected Africa for good or for bad.<sup>31</sup> In Africa some people have arrived at despising their tradition and culture and to see in the foreign ideas and cultures the means of attaining human dignity. In many cases, people seek as a way of compensation when they are subjected to oppression and exploitation, to forget their own traditional life in the past and to identify themselves exclusively with the culture of their oppressors.

If social changes result nowadays in the lowering of morality (pervasive juvenile delinquencies, weakened professional consciousness, a lax sexual morality etc.) traditional society has had and still has a high standard of morality. Stealing was rare in villages in those days as it is even now where tradition values are maintained. The conduct of young people was on the whole praise-worthy and the wisdom of the elders was expressed in

<sup>28</sup> P. Merand, *La vie quotidienne en Afrique Noire à travers la Littérature Africaine* (Paris: Edition Harmattan, [n.d.?]), 26.

<sup>29</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Ibadan, 1982), 209.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>31</sup> E. B. Idowu, *Per Una Teologia Africana* (Milano: Edizione Jaca Books, 1973), 18.



words which lived on. The moral life of the African religions can be traced not to an interior divine law, but the common good of the group. In this sense, the notion of sin did not exist for him without the notion of injury to the group. One can therefore cite the practice of very many tribes to whom the moral laws owe their obligatory character to the common good of the group. In this mentality, the principal faults consist in the harm done to the cohesion of the group; such as stealing, witchcraft, etc. From such a view point, the moral standard of the African religion consists of a series of legislations covering work, food, family behaviour and in a general way, all of social life. Violations of these laws anger the ancestral spirits, causes droughts, sterility, famine, sickness and death.

There must therefore be a positive attitude towards the traditional life style so as to restore the moral values of the yesteryears. In Africa, right from his young age, the child gain access to the wealth of the African culture through story-telling and listening: the legends, fairy tales, quizzes or proverbs, which are narrated to him by the grand-mother or uncle. After supper, the night reunites the children around the fire-place. The elder narrates the stories. There each person listens to the teachings of the ancestors through the mouth of the elders. These teachings could be on morals, religion, history or mere entertainment. This intellectual activity of the young soul marks a turning in their deep knowledge of Africa. The narrator neither reads nor writes, but owns his knowledge to oral tradition. The art of speaking is an important element in African culture. It enables the speaker to awaking the intellectual curiosity of the hearer, to exercise the memory and to acquire knowledge. Education was the means by which the morality of the group was inculcated in the young: education through initiation rites under the supervision of the elders, as well as school education which became subsequently available and the traditional family education which continued to remain the favourite centre for moral formation.

Rewards and punishments in African societies are not meted out by supernatural beings only; human society has its own rewards and punishment.<sup>32</sup> Rewards are in the form of praise and honour to those who do good, while punishment are reserved for offenders. Other offences may be dealt with by public opinion, and this may take the form of ridicule or social disapproval, which could also result in the offender being ostracised. The fear of being ostracised in communalistic societies of Africa is very strong and on account of this, vices are avoided and certain virtues are pursued. The important role that communal feeling plays in determining moral values originates from the African notion that man is never alone, and to be really human being, one must belong to the community.

The welfare and solidarity of the community are not separated from the moral actions of the individuals. Individual behaviour and moral choices therefore have a communal dimension, for what a person does in accordance with the established norms contributes to the welfare of the entire community; his misdeeds, however, can bring

<sup>32</sup> K. A. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: F.E.P. International Limited, 1978), 160.



calamity to them, as the Ibos say, "If one finger touches oil, it soils the others". Even nature itself is believed to revolt when men do wrong, often when rain fails, the malicious deeds of men are held to be responsible.

Each community or society has its own set of restitution or punishment for various offences, both legal and moral. These range from death for grave offences like witchcraft and murder, to paying fines of cattle, sheep or money for minor cases. It is generally the elders of the land who deal with disputes and breaches arising from various types of moral harm or offences against custom and ritual. Traditional chiefs have a duty of keeping law and order, and executing justice in their area.

### **African Rituals as Privileged Context for Inculturation**

Notwithstanding the all-pervading nature of modern life and its impact on the African traditional world view and value systems, the life encounter of most Africans and its meaning through the channels of religious symbols is paramount. The symbolic ritual actions are still most appealing and efficacious. Even today, whenever religious moments are highly ritualised, they pull crowds: the station of the cross and the distribution of ashes in Ash Wednesdays etc., all indicate the high encounter level of people when faced with rituals. This is as a result of its strong resonance with the instinct acquired from traditional culture. There is therefore a great need to explore the traditional rituals and symbols in the African culture so as to revitalise and enrich the already existing but less lively sacramental practice. An example of the traditional rite of reconciliation after conflict could be used. In the traditional African religious life, reconciliation is spread out in the different ritual actions marking different moments of life, unlike in Christian teaching in which reconciliation is minimally ritualised in the sacrament of penance.

### **Conclusion**

Critical areas in the Inculturation of African reconciliatory values include the understanding of morality from the African perspective; that is, taking into special consideration the particularity of the traditional world view which plays a big role in the moral life of people. The insight acquired from this understanding is then put to use in a form of an Inculturated Catechesis or teaching, employing the traditional methods of instructions, of passing on knowledge, the efficacy of which has been proven by a relatively high standard of moral life in traditional societies. Reconciliatory acts can also draw a lot from the traditional rites and symbols of reconciliation in African life: reconciliation within and between families and communities, and between clans and ethnic groups. Rather than rely almost completely in the Church's official rites of reconciliation whose emphasis is more of reconciling individual souls with his God as if that was a private affair of the penitent, the Church should now be able to employ a highly ritualised and more robust form of reconciliation rites found in the African traditional culture.



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