
African Culture as a Basis for Ecumenism

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Abstract

Ecumenism is a process by which Christian Churches that had been separated by doctrinal, social, ethnic, political and institutional factors move towards cooperation and unity, by mutual understanding and respect through dialogue. This piece argues that the foundation of this dialogue must be anchored on the foundation of what is really common to all or is acceptable by all. It further argues that the African culture, which has given churches in Africa a distinctive identity, can serve as a basis for ecumenism. Thus, particular beliefs in the religious, religio-social, religio-cultural and religio-moral spheres of African traditional belief system can serve as a common ground for ecumenical dialogue.

Keywords: Ecumenism, African, African, Culture, Basis, Church, Christian, Social, Cultural, Moral.

Introduction

A cursory glance at the historical commitment of the Catholic Church towards ecumenism reveals that since 325 AD, beginning with the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, through the Lateran Ecumenical Council of 1179 to the First and Second Vatican Councils of 1869-1970 and 1962-1965 respectively, amounting to 21 ecumenical councils in the historical evolution of the *ecclesia*, reveals that the Church, is truly, in a theological sense, 'an ecumenical council formed in response to the divine convoking'; and in fact Beck (1975) wrote that "The Catholic Church as the Church of all would in fact be unfaithful to itself if it were to take the divisions of Christendom simply as a fact about which nothing can be done" (p. 420). This notwithstanding, the church's Modern commitment to ecumenical dialogue is based on the rediscovery of shared experiences among Christian denominations as well as the common prayer for the Holy Spirit's gift of unity to the church. Kilcourse (2003), avers that this is very significant as it serves as a ground of truth that transcends the historic divisions among churches, which are inherited misconceptions and misunderstandings, which has

concealed God's gift of unity, to a convergence and consensus on the truth of faith. While this piece concerns itself with ecumenism, its burden is on how African culture can contribute to the enhancement of ecumenical dialogue among churches in Africa. Beyond the immediate teachings of scripture and the traditions of Christianity, the tenets of African culture, that are in agreement with Christian teachings which are acceptable by Christian churches in Africa are employed to serve as a basis for Christian communion.

The Meaning and Nature of Ecumenism

Ecumenism is derived from the Greek word *oikoumene*, which means "the whole inhabited world", and was specifically used in reference to the Roman Empire. From the etymology, ecumenical vision will encompass both the search for the visible unity of the church (Eph 4:3) and the whole inhabited earth (Mt 24:14). However, it is a process by which Christian Churches that had been separated by doctrinal, social, ethnic, political and institutional factors move towards cooperation and unity, by mutual understanding and respect through dialogue. Stransky (1995) avers that it is an unceasing search to draw all Christians together through the renewal of the churches in order to manifest the unity that Christ wills for his one and only Church, and the obligation of the church to proclaim the gospel to the world, as a servant to both the gospel and the world. He further wrote that, "unity is not uniformity but a diversity of theological expressions and forms of ecclesiastical life, rooted in different traditions and various cultural, ethnic, or historical contexts" (p. 458). This notwithstanding, Christian ecumenism is treated in relation to three main divisions of Christianity: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestants.

The Nature and Meaning of African Culture

Kanu (2010) avers that the African like every other human person is shaped by his culture and he contributes to the shaping and transmission of this culture. The African therefore, is a *homo culturalis*. The African culture generally refers to all those things which go to the refining and developing of the African's diverse mental and psychological endowments (Gaudium et Spes, 1965). The word culture is so rich and all encompassing that both sociologists and anthropologists have defined in multifarious ways. Adamson (1972) describes cultures as the integral system of learned behaviour patterns which are the characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance. In other words, culture does not come from human genes, but rather it is learnt and taught. This bears with the etymology of the word culture as *colere*, which means "to cultivate" or "to practice". The human person is therefore the author and architect of culture. He does not participate passively in the shaping and transmitting of culture, it is an active participation.

The African culture would consist of the patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired by the African and transmitted by symbols. It includes

the embodiments in African artefacts, the historically derived and selected traditional ideas and values. It is a way of life that is particularly African. Values of African culture include: honesty and truthfulness, and the Igbo put this ontological principle in the maxim: *Eziokwu bu ndu* (truth is life), hospitality is another value, this is seen the expression that “there is no special rendezvous required to join in meal... on arrival, once there is food, the visitor is invited to eat” (Iroegbu, 1994). Elders in Africa are esteemed as figures of wisdom; as such respect for elders is a tradition. There is respect for sacredness of life; the African believes that life is from God. This manifested in the names that the Igbo people give to their children: *Chiwendu* (God is the owner of life), *Chikerendu* (God made life). Purity of life is also valued and prized as life itself. Communal life is also part of African cultural value, and this is summed up in Mbiti’s popular expression “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1969: 104). There is also this deep sense of sensitivity towards the sacred, and expression of the African worldview in music and dance. However, following external influences on the African culture, these values have undergone some degree of modifications.

Ecclesia in Africa and Africae Munus as Theological Foundations for an Afro-Christian Investigation

The current investigation which takes cognizance of the possibility of African culture contributing to the ecumenical process is based on the recommendations of *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus*. In *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope John Paul II exhorted the church to discover the values of African culture, which in the contention of Nkemnkia (2010) includes the profound sense of religion, the sacred, the existence of the spiritual world, of an eternal and Supreme Being. While encouraging this dialogue, he wrote,

At all levels: between bishops, Episcopal conferences or hierarchical assemblies and the Apostolic See, between conferences or Episcopal assemblies of the different nations of the same continent and those of other continents, and within each particular church, between the bishop, the presbyterate, consecrated persons, pastoral workers, within the same church... and other Christian denominations-ecumenism. (No. 65-66).

He strongly believes that a serene and prudent dialogue, especially with African Traditional Religion, will protect Christians from negative influences, on the one hand, and foster the assimilation of positive values which are readily harmonized with the content of the Christian faith, on the other hand. During the numerous apostolic journeys of Pope John Paul II to Africa, he has always included in his agenda a meeting with the followers of African Traditional Religion and has often addressed them with due respect. It is thus not surprising that he wrote, “... the adherents of African Traditional Religion should therefore be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided. For this purpose, suitable courses in African

traditional religion should be given in houses of formation for priests and religious” (No. 67).

While *Ecclesia in Africa* emphasized the need for evangelization and interreligious dialogue, *Africae Munus* puts emphasis on the evangelization of culture and emphasized interculturality and inculturation as instruments for the evangelization of culture. Pope Benedict XVI in *Africae Munus* recommended a profound study of African Traditional Religion and culture in the light of the word of God. He wrote, “in her (the church) concern for relevance and credibility, the church needs to carry out a thorough discernment in order to identify those aspects of the culture which represent an obstacle to the incarnation of gospel values, as well as those aspects which promote them” (No. 36). Writing further, the Roman Pontiff wrote,

... in this way, the Pentecost-event continuous in history, in the unity of one and the same faith, enriched by the diversity of languages and cultures. The Holy Spirit enables the gospel to permeate all cultures, without becoming subservient to any. Bishops should be vigilant over this need for inculturation, respecting the norms established by the Church. By discerning which cultural elements and traditions are contrary to the gospel, they will be able to separate the good seeds from the weeds. While remaining true to itself, in total fidelity to the gospel message and the Church’s tradition, Christianity will thus adopt the face of the countless cultures and peoples among whom it has found a welcome and taken root. The church will then become an icon of the future which the Spirit of God is preparing for us, an icon which the church of Africa has a contribution of her own to make. (No. 37).

Through this, the positive elements of African culture are emphasized for the fashioning of society for harmony, since these values embody traditional formulae for peaceful coexistence.

The Scandal of Divided Christendom and the Betrayal of Mission

In the relationships among Catholics, the Protestants and Pentecostals, there still exists mutual intolerance and unchristian forms of competition, which is the scandal of a divided Christendom, running counter to scripture, one that all churches are bound to remove. There is the problem of denominations claiming to be the true church, with the conviction of being in possession of the truth, which are formulated in doctrines and propositions and taught to adherents. Opponents are referred to as heretics, and each group giving much energy to the refutation of their opponent point by point. This has led to a hardening of positions and a narrower/one-sided view of reality.

Very recently, in fact, on Sunday, 1st December 2013, Pastor Chris Okotie, the General Overseer of the House Hold of God’s Church and former Presidential Candidate, allegedly made a statement in his Church in Ikeja made the following statements about the Catholic Church,

- “A counterfeit church set up by Satan, bow to Idols”;
- “They are not Christians and have never been”;

- “They don’t know Jesus. They believe that when they eat bread on Sundays, they are eating the body of Jesus. It is ritual”;
- “The Pope (Francis) is an Anti-Christ and the Catholic Church will soon declare for Satan. This is the end of times”;
- “Catholics will go to hell”;
- “They don’t believe in heaven. They believe in purgatory. The purgatory that they invented”;
- “The church has been there for Satan and at the right time they will declare for Satan”.

Such statements among others, that many Christian denominations make on the television about fellow Christian faiths have become increasingly very common among church leaders who are scouting for members or to retain their members. There are questions of mixed marriages and denominational schools which have not been properly solved. There is a disorganized collaboration in theology. There are different translations of the Bible which could have been done in common as encouraged by Pope Paul VI. There is an unfair exploitation of conversions for propaganda purposes by all sides, which can well be avoided. Unless different churches come together, they cannot serve as the conscience of secular society. Only then can they intervene in society in favour of peace, the abolition of racial discrimination, the pursuit of social justice, the eradication of nationalist prejudices and the protection of the poor and the weak.

Divided Christendom as an Imported Schism

A cursory glance at the origins of schisms in the history of Christianity reveals that they were ready-made in Europe and imported to Africa. The first division of Christianity took place in 1054, between the east and the west. It had deep cultural undertone, the east was Greek with its base in Constantinople and the west Latin with its base in Rome. When Pope Leo IX excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople, it was misinterpreted as the excommunication of the entire Greek Church. Thus, the church of Constantinople broke away from the church of Rome, with the churches in Bulgaria, Serbia and Russia doing likewise. In 1517, Martin Luther launched an attack on the doctrine of the church through his 95 theses. When the Pope announced his position as heretical, Luther reacted by denying the infallibility of the Pope. This dispute, according to Gbenda (2001) led to Anglicanism in England, Lutheranism in Germany, Zwinglianism in Switzerland, Presbyterianism in Scotland, Congregationalism in England, Baptist and Methodist in Holland. In the early part of the 20th century emerged Pentecostalism out of Wesleyan Holiness Movements in the United States of America, which emphasized the Pentecost experience. None of these breakages or schisms occurred in Africa, neither were people of African descent involved.

When missionaries came into Africa, they imported them as European grown products, and Africans started becoming schismatics without even knowing how it began. When the Methodists came, they converted some Africans into their

schism group, the Lutherians, the Anglicans etc did the same. Like the colonial masters who divided Africa into patchworks for their own personal interest, these missionaries tore Africa into piece for the extension of their schismatic groups. All these missionary groups came with different worldviews that were dictated by the particular mission, which began to clash. African communities that were bound by culture and tradition were divided into groups and even fought one another on the basis of faith differences. Sometimes a faith that many Africans did not and have not yet understood.

Parameters in African Culture for Ecumenical Dialogue

Before the advent of Christianity, African Traditional Religion was already inexistence and practiced among Africans. It was their religion, and formed the background for their interpretation of reality. This is not in any way to assert that African Traditional Religion is superior to Christianity, but only to observe that African Traditional Religion, no matter the degree of conversion to Christianity, remains a denominator in the religious experience of all Africans. Onaiyekan (2013) observes that even though some parts of Africa, like Egypt and Ethiopia came into contact with Christianity during the early part of the first century of the Christian era, the earliest documented appearance of Christianity in the geographical area we now called Nigeria dates only to the 2nd half of the 15th century. It is from this background that elements of African traditional thought are employed as a common denominator for ecumenical dialogue, even though divided by a variety of faith.

1. Africa's Sense of the Sacred and Mystery

In Africa, there is widespread belief in a supreme God, unique and transcendent. Africans have a sense of the sacred and a sense of mystery; there is high reverence for sacred places, persons and objects; sacred times are celebrated. It is difficult to separate the life of the African from his personal inclination to the divine. It is in this regard that he does everything with the consciousness of God. Mbiti (1969) puts this succinctly,

Wherever the African is, there is his religion. He carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting new crop, he takes it with him to a beer parlour or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament. (p. 2)

In the contention of Njoku (2004), this aspect of the African's daily life was such that he had many taboos to observe, and many daily rituals to perform, either to appease the community or the divinities. If he was not an indirect or unconscious slave of the dominant conscious, he held perpetual allegiance to one divinity or another. If he was 'free' with men, he was not free with nature or his environment. Suppose community and environment allow him to live his life with fewer burdens, he would still have to pay the debts owed by his past ancestors. This sense of sacredness and mystery provides a ground, at least for African indigenous missionaries to come together for ecumenical dialogue.

There is harmonious interplay between the Decalogue and the African moral code. In view of the first Decalogue which makes us duty bound to God, African ethics similarly has an unreserved respect for the divine. His everyday life is pervaded by the thoughts of the sacred.

2. Africa's Ancestor Worship

African's great value of ancestor worship. "Everywhere the African is first defined by reference to his ancestor" (Maquet, 1972). The ancestors, "living or dead" are the great intermediaries between the African Great God (with different names in different African nations). According to Kanu (2011), on becoming a Christian, the African easily sees Christ, the only mediator between God and man, as "a proto-ancestor." This interpretation is advanced by African theologians in their effort to Africanize the church or incarnate Christianity in the local culture.

3. Africa's Sense of Hospitality

The African sense of '*Hospitality*' is one of the values that are still quite alive. Hospitality is a duty and is the most common value in African Traditional Religion. Between kith and kin and people of the same clan there is a very strong sense of sharing and of solidarity and belonging. Efforts are made to secure and promote justice and peace within the community. The nuclear family and the extended family have been the pivots of the African social system. Respect for authority, sanctioned by the ancestors, is strong and represents the common will. The poor and the sick are taken care of; widows and orphans are looked after.

Africans are generally known to be hospitable and accommodating. Visitors are well received and treated, with the African conviction that visitors are bearers of blessing and as such whoever welcomes a visitor welcomes peace. Everyone is a potential visitor because the host today may become the visitor to the hosted tomorrow, and sharing of meals is not usually preceded by notification (Ujah, 2007).

Ireogbu (1994) views the African spirit of hospitality thus,

No special rendezvous is required to join in a meal in another family one has just visited during a meal. On arrival, once there is food, the visitor is invited is invited to eat. He or she is treated is kindly, just as one would like to be treated when visiting another home. Sharing with a needy neighbour who comes for assistance is a value that is highly cherished in African culture (p. 88).

The Christian scripture advises that "Let your foot be seldom in your neighbour's house lest he become weary and hate you" (Prov 25:17). This passage of scripture encourages hospitality, however it warns against those who take advantage of people's hospitality.

4. Respect for Elders

Elders are seen as both spiritual and moral guides who are endowed with wisdom; that is why it is said that "what an elder sees when he is seated, a child cannot see even when he is standing". This respect is not only restricted to the

elders within one's area but to all elders, wherever they are met. It is in this regard that Nwako (2009) said that moral values are common to all Africans and that respect is given to elders irrespective of social status or position. We give them their due respect because they are the custodians of traditional norms and customs. In the Yoruba culture, prostration before an elder is a form of greeting, sometimes bowing and removal of caps are also signs of respect. And because of the place the African cultures gives to elders, they must make out time in the evenings to train the conscience of young men and women through proverbs, stories and folktales. Through this practice, virtues are learnt by African children from their childhood.

Against the background of this great African value, a person is an individual to the extent that he is a member of a family, a clan or community. Another great value in traditional Africa is *Respect* for old people (senior citizens), particularly one's parents, grandparents and relatives. Together with this value, one must also consider "ancestor worship" as an important related value in African culture. In fact, the basis for the honour and respect accorded to old people in the traditional African culture is their closeness to the ancestors, for in his ontological conceptual scheme the African places his old relatives closest to his ancestors or dead relatives in his great hierarchy of beings. The African teaching on respect for elders also has parallels in Christianity: "My son, hear the instruction of your father, and forsake not the law of your mother" (Prov. 1:8). "Honour your father and your mother that your days may be long upon the land which your Lord your God gives you" (Exo 2:12).

5. The African Value for Life

Morality is another area where there is considerable parallel between Christianity and African culture. This is probably due to the fact that morality flows naturally from religious creed and that man, in both the African and the Christian cultures, has a hereafter whose condition is determined by the quality of one's present life. According to African culture, to gain that hereafter as a place of comfort one must behave in ways consonant with the demands of the divinities and ancestors (Amucheazi, 1980).

Amongst the African, there is respect for life; children are treasured and abortion is an abomination. The sacredness of human life is guarded by taboos and rituals. There is respect for the dignity of man; each man has his own inalienable *chi* (destiny). Sin is perceived in both its personal and communal dimensions. Moderation in the use of alcohol is inculcated: only adults may drink. Drunkenness is shameful. Indeed moderation is required in every aspect of human behaviour. For Christianity, as for African culture, no human action or behaviour good or bad, escapes the vigilant attention of both God and the earth god, Ala respectively: they reward or punish man according to his actions, good or bad. Christianity and African Culture diverge from each other only in their choice of the instrument for the execution of the reward or punishment (Amucheazi, 1980).

Africans believe that life comes from God, and as such has a transcendental dimension. The sacredness attached to life due to designation of God as its source is evident in the names Igbo people give to their children: *Chiwendu* (God is the owner of life), *Chikerendu* (God made life), and as such in Igbo traditional society *Igbu Ochu* (murder) was the greatest abomination. To kill merited either capital punishment or total banishment from the community.

To touch a person's life, starkly put, to shed blood, especially innocent blood is the greatest evil on earth, against the earth and against humanity. It is Nso Ala (taboo) that has the mightiest sanction in the world (Ireogbu, 1994: 84).

The African values the whole of creation as sacred. To him nature is neither uncanny nor for subjugation and exploitation, but something sacred, participating in the essential sacred nature of God Himself and of all reality. Open spaces, fields, forests, trees, oceans and lakes are sacred to him and consequently important as places reminiscent of the ashes of his fathers and the sanctuaries of his gods. The African traditional religious life has always considered all life to be the sphere of the Almighty, the powerful (the Otumfoo), the Omnipotent (Gye Nyame). He is wise, and all seeing and all knowing. He is the Great Spider (Ananse Kokroko), and the Ancient of Days (Odomankoma). Life is therefore considered sacred and held in high esteem. Right from the womb, life is protected and the greatest joy of a family is the birth of a child. This is why Africans do all that is in their power to save life, and whatever harms life is their greatest enemy.

Summary and Conclusion

From the foregoing, this piece has studied the meaning of ecumenism is a process by which Christian Churches that had been separated by doctrinal, social, ethnic, political and institutional factors move towards cooperation and unity, by mutual understanding and respect through dialogue. It also studied the meaning of African culture for a better understanding and appreciation of the context of this research, and using the recommendations of *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus* as the theological basis for the research. It further reflected on the scandal of divided Christendom as a betrayal of the missionary mandate of Jesus. While it accepts the need for ecumenical dialogue, it argues that the foundation of this dialogue must be anchored on the foundation of what is really common to all or is acceptable by all, precisely in Africa. It discovers that the African culture, which has given churches in Africa a distinctive identity, can serve as a basis for ecumenism. Thus, particular beliefs in the religious, religio-social, religio-cultural and religio-moral spheres of African traditional belief system can serve as a common ground for ecumenical dialogue.

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