

AFRICAN RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL VALUES IMPACT THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Timothy Barga PhD.

St. Augustine's Major Seminary Jos
& University of Jos, Dept of Religion & Philosophy

timbarga@yahoo.com

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.18801.43362

Abstract

The aim of this article is to acknowledge the impact of African religious beliefs and traditional cultural values to the development of Christianity in the sub-Saharan Africa. The challenge facing African Christian theology is that has not been developed to deal with African spiritual needs and mentality. Though the faith has been planted from the inception of the gospel being preached in north Africa, there is still much to be done to make African theology independent of its parent theology. The thesis began with the historical dilemma that confronted African Christianity in the 20th century. The author made his claim about the influence of African religious beliefs and cultural values that enriched the development of its theology in the 21st century Christianity. Its major objective is to unearth the rich resources in African religious and cultural values to the development of African theology. It however, shared its common fears and challenges. A posteriori approach has been employed by the author to expose the claim of the thesis.

Keywords: African, religious, Cultural, Values, Development, Christian Theology

Introduction

In this article, the author challenges the popular public conception that Christianity in Africa is a latecomer introduced only with the advent of colonialism. By tracing the origins of the Christian faith in both North and sub-Saharan Africa (including, North-Central and West Africa), this paper seeks to show that Christianity has been in Africa virtually since its inception and that the continent's own adherents to this faith played an important role in the formation and advance of Christianity elsewhere. Moreover, Christianity in Africa can be found almost everywhere on the continent and indigenous varieties of the tradition developed which allowed it to become as part of Africa as African traditional religions.

The breakneck rise in African Christianity in the last 100 years and above is one of the most under-appreciated success stories in global religious history. In 1900, there were less than 10 million Christians on the continent, many of whom were non-native missionaries. A century later in the year 2000, there were 350 million. By 2025, that number is expected to nearly double, to somewhere between 630 and 700 million believers. What explains and contributes to this speedy growth of Christianity in Africa which is termed as the epicenter of Christianity globally today is the seed bed of the faith already found in African religious beliefs and cultural values. Describing the contribution of Africa to Christianity, Mbiti has this to say:

African Christianity made a great contribution to Christendom through scholarship, participation in church councils, defence of the faith, movements like monasticism, theology, translation and preservation of the scriptures, martyrdom, the famous catechetical school of Alexandria, liturgy and even heresies and controversies.¹

This attests to Christianity being the beneficiary of African rich religious and cultural values. However, despite these rich resources to the growth of Christianity, Africa people still fumble with teaching of the Christian faith.

Historical Dilemma to African Theology

In 1976, liberation theologians from Africa, Asia and Latin America gathered in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, for an 'Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians'. These theologians met to critique their invisibility from Western theological discourse and share efforts to develop liberation-orientated perspectives from their own context. They founded The Ecumenical Organization of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). The popularity of Latin American liberation theologies set the agenda for the initial meetings of EATWOT and gave the organization its public identity. At the first General Assembly in New Delhi, most of the major speeches were given by Latin Americans; significant roles were given to Asians, but the African delegation was ignored. Engleberg Mveng, a member of the African delegation, reflected that:

while the general assembly made provision for all the other continents, Africa was excluded. Our delegation was invited as auditors. African theologians experienced a double marginalization. They were ignored by Western theologians and marginalized by their third world colleagues.

¹ Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969, 229.

Evidently, Africa is not taken seriously. Even in the Third World itself Africa remains the everlasting marginalized continent.²

Africa's loss of status is ironic because its voice rang so powerfully in the ancient world. Africa is the origin of humanity, cradle of civilization, this is where the earliest medical and mathematical texts were discovered, the land where the first writing systems developed and the place where the earliest religious texts were excavated. African civilizations had already achieved their Golden Age while Christianity was in its infancy. Nevertheless, Africa had a decisive impact on the formation of Christian faith. The biblical nations of Egypt, Cush, Put, Punt, Seba and Sheba figured prominently in Hebrew scriptures, and Africa's New Testament presence is visible in Acts (2:10). Egypt and Libya are the home of some of the earliest Christian communities and many of the leading Patristic thinkers such as Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, Athanasius, Cyril and Augustine were Africans. The invisibility of Africa in theological discourse is not due to its classic heritage but its modern decline. During the modern period, Christianity was reintroduced to Africa under the auspices of empire. Christian missionaries during the period from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries entered Africa as forerunners to Western expansion. They understood their mission as bringing the light of the gospel to a Dark Continent and civilizing primitive peoples. Their encounters with Africans were characterized by subordination, coercion and violence. Under a western cosmology, African religions and cultures were deemed demonic and superstitious; Africans were forced to abandon their faiths and make room for foreign religions.³

There were two initial responses to the Christian enterprise: acceptance or rejection. Later, a third response developed that aimed to reconcile Christian faith with African culture. This third response sought to wrestle the hermeneutical initiative from Europe and carve out a distinctive African voice in theology. The Negritude movement of the 1930s and 40s was a significance force and factor in the rise of this third response. It awakened a suppressed cultural voice that African Christians used to express themselves in the modern world.

²Joseph, M. Y Edusa-Eyison. "Kwesi A. Dickson: The Bible and African Life and Thought in Dialogue." Benezet Bujo and Juvenal Iluga Muga (Eds). *African Theology: Contribution of Pioneers*. Vol. 2. Nairobi: Paulines, 2005, Publications, 97-9.

³ Barga, Timothy. *A Pastoral Approach to African Christian Theology*. Jos: Fab Anieh Press, 2012. Largely a classnotes discussion and contribution in the saint Augustine's major seminary Jos of Plateau state, 2014.

Negritude was first used by African priests to revive a cultural consciousness and adapt Christian faith to the African situation. Eventually it led to the development of a liberationist approach in African theology. The use of Negritude to develop a liberationist voice was controversial because Negritude was a contested category. For some, Negritude was nothing more than a nativist philosophy that promoted a metaphysic of race that justified imperialism. Others had a more positive assessment that Negritude was an initiative to recover African traditional values and vernaculars in service to the struggle for liberation. Negritude represented a significant development in the formation of African diasporic identity. Certain features of Negritude find their roots in the thought of Wilmot Blyden, W. E. B. DuBois, Anna Julia Cooper, Marcus Garvey and others who represent the Pan-Africanist tradition. The heart of the Negritude movement revolves around the work of three Francophone intellectuals: Le´opold Sedar Senghor (1906, Joël, Senegal), Aime´ Ce´saire (1913, Basse Pointe, Martinique), Le´on-Gentran Damas (1912, Cayenne, Guyana).⁴ These intellectuals wrestled with the question; how do we grasp our existence as black in the context of colonial order? Negritude understands itself as a literary and philosophical movement that responds to colonial domination. It is less concerned with colonial bureaucracies than with colonial ways of thinking. Colonial thinking is premised on the image of a civilized and advanced Europe and a primitive and backwards Africa. Negritude responds to two pillars of colonial discourse. The first pillar is the power of erasure. The conquest and colonization of the African world not only annexed lands but erased histories and interrupted cultures. Franz Fanon, the Martiniquan psychiatrist, explained: colonialism is not content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated people. Colonialism is not satisfied merely holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.⁵

The power to distort, disfigure and erase the histories of the colonized is one of the most terrifying dimensions of colonial power. This not only led to psychic disorientation in oppressed populations, but also arrested the development of the African world. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aime Ce´saire reasons that ‘the

⁴ Vencente, Carlos Kiaziku. *Culture and Inculturation: A Bantu Viewpoint*. Paulines Publications, 2009, 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

colonial mission to “civilize” the primitive is just a smoke screen. Colonialism results in the massive destruction of whole societies and histories I would add – societies that not only function at a high level of sophistication and complexity but that might offer the West valuable lessons about how we might live together and remake the modern world.⁶ The violence of colonialism forced African people to bear the wounds of invisibility as a consequence of the colonial encounter. Their history and cultures were interrupted, and the grand narrative of the conquerors became the official history of the region. The second pillar is racial Othering. The colonizers’ sense of superiority depended on turning the Other into a barbarian. Racial Othering is a social process of demarcation where differential standards and moral codes are applied to distinct racial groups. Following the arguments in *Discourse on Colonialism*, the historian Robin Kelley writes, “the Africans, the Indians, the Asians cannot possess civilization or a culture equal to that of the imperialists. The colonial encounter requires a reinvention of the colonized, the deliberate destruction of her past”⁷. Once reinvented, the colonized were defined through categories primitive, savage, irrational and barbaric that excluded them from respectable discourse. Negritude was part of the process to undo the damage of colonialism. It made blacks legible on the world’s stage and empowered them to mount a fierce battle to be heard, recognized and respected. Negritude enabled Africans and Caribbeans for the first time in the modern period to deploy blackness as a positive concept. This disrupted processes of racial Othering and signified pride in ancestry, the beauty of blackness and a call to arms against colonialism. Negritude invited blacks to participate in an identity broader than ones previously available through kinship, ethnicity and race. It fostered what Benedict Anderson refers to as an imagined community a community where there is a mental and emotional affinity among blacks that transcends nationality, language and economic circumstances. Negritude connects blacks to something bigger than themselves and invites them to share in a new sense of historic purpose.⁸

Factors that Inducted the Development African Christian Theology

Christianity is recent in Black Africa except for the Coptic and Orthodox Churches in Egypt and Ethiopia, few of the African Churches are over 120 years old. The original method of evangelization was implantation of a Western form

⁶ Vencente, Carlos Kiaziku. *Culture and Inculturation: A Bantu Viewpoint*. Paulines Publications, 2009, 24-5.

⁷ Barga, Timothy. *A Pastoral Approach to African Christian Theology*. Jos: Fab Anieh, 2012, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

of Christianity in most parts of the continent. Hence theology, liturgy, spirituality and Church Law were and still are to a great extent Western in character. This state of affairs was enhanced by the general contempt for African Traditional Religious and cultures values among the early missionaries who were not infrequently allies of the colonial policy. Gradually, however reports John Parrat, the situation changed. Many factors were responsible for this change though not all of them are strictly theological in nature implicitly implied. One of such factors was rediscovery and better understanding of the African religious values and cultures which received a great impetus from the literary movement in French-speaking Africa popularly known as Negritude which emerged through the study of human sciences like social or cultural anthropology and sociology.⁹ As the values of African traditional religions and cultures was coming to be more and appreciated, not only through the monographs of trained anthropologist but even more through the surveys of scholars such as Geoffrey Parrinder, a former missionary and lecturer at the university of Ibadan.

The second key factor for the new thought about African theology was the movements towards political changes leading to independence in many African colonial territories during the late 1950s and early 1960s. This favoured the attitude of positive appreciation of African traditional beliefs and customs among the Africans together with a marked sense of their cultural identity. Parratt accounts "it seemed incongruous to African Christians that while African nations were becoming independent politically, the church in Africa should remain essentially controlled by European missionaries".¹⁰

A third factor was the appreciation of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The council has a positive appreciation of African cultures and its prescription of adaptation in all spheres of Church life, including theology. As a result, the Post-Conciliar African Churches are characterized by an increasing effort to Africanize the Church in theology, liturgy as well as in pastoral and catechetical spheres. This effort is generally supported by frequent exhortations of the members of the hierarchy.

⁹ John, Parratt. A Reader in African Christian Theology. New Edition. Great Britain: SPCK, 2001, 2.

¹⁰ Parrat, 2.

Fourth factor was contribution of European missionaries themselves. It would be ungracious to ignore explicit role of great African missionaries in the likes of father Placid Tempels, a Belgium priest posted to Belgium DRC Congo where he worked for 29 years and as a result of his great experience among the Congo nation, developed the Bantu Ethical philosophy, in which he had carefully argued that African religious thought is systematic and logical and can perceives God.¹¹ A little later Parrinder began his serious and systematic study of African religion. Other non-African such as bishop sundkler and Harold Tuner encouraged African theologians by editing collections of essays and conference paper to promote the study of African Christian theology.

Prolegomena for African Christian Theology

- i. The fundamental reason for doing African theology is in fact the incarnational nature of Christianity itself. John the evangelist asserts that God so loved the world that He wanted to share His very self with men and women of all ages by inviting them into a life-giving relationship with the Godhead. For Stephen Bevans, the vital means by which God could achieve this relationship with mankind is by his birth into human condition. By this he meant that the Word became a concrete human being in the person of Jesus, within a particular culture, family, with particular race. Therefore, the incarnation experience is not an ended project of historical past.¹² It is a continuous process of becoming. Hence, as African Synod Fathers acknowledged, if Christianity is to be faithful to its deepest root and most basic insight, it must continue God's incarnation in Jesus by becoming contextual in order to receive Jesus Christ in the fullness of their personal existence; personal, cultural, economic and political.¹³
- ii. Mbiti makes a distinction between Christianity on the one hand and the Christian faith of the gospel message on the other. Christianity, he says is the end product from the encounter of the gospel within any given local community or society. It is always indigenous and by definition culture bound. Hence no Christianity exists without affiliation with people's culture.¹⁴

¹¹ Barga, Timothy. *A Pastoral Approach to African Christian Theology*. Jos: Fab Anieh, 2012, 6.

¹² Bevans, Stephen. *Models of Contextual Theology*. New York: Orbis Books, 2006, 5.

¹³ John Paul II. *Ecclesia in Africa*. Paulines Publication, 1995, no 62.

¹⁴ Mbiti, S. John. *Bible and Theology in Africa*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1986, 45.

- iii. There is a general dissatisfaction with the European theology practice in Africa today because such theology poses itself as unchanging and finished *theologia perennis* not contestable in the name of relevance, but it does not fit the African world view. Western theology negligence to African heritage explains the woes of underdevelopment, negative self-image and poor leadership in Africa today. By overlooking its heritage, Christianity in Africa is not only foreign but dislocated because according to Luke Nnamdi, it overlooks the contribution peculiar to its African members.¹⁵
- iv. The rapid expansion and growth of Pentecostalism and African independent churches is an indication that some African Christians are doing their local theology that suits their needs and mentality. This move by African independent churches is a testimony that the imported western Christianity with its structures, pattern of ministries, liturgical form do not answer their aspirations.
- v. Bolaji Idowu expressed his thought as to why African Christians need a theology that represents their aspirations. He explained that the church in Africa has for too long been preaching about the stranger God of the Whiteman who is unfamiliar with the local spiritual problems in the community. He argues that Christianity was of no practical use in times of existential crises and that is why they often revert to traditional practices when confronted with serious situations unfamiliar to the God of the white man.¹⁶
- vi. Another factor that promotes the demand for African theology is that fact the seed or logos of God is not restricted to a particular age, time and race. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the world is the universal plan of God to reveal himself to all people. And the characteristic feature of the Holy Spirit is to guide people to the source of the complete truth in God and his wisdom for human benefit. To this, Richard Gehman articulates that this process of indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a continuous one of which Africa is a beneficiary.¹⁷

¹⁵ Nnamdi, Mbefo Luke. *Christian Theology and African Heritage*. Onitsha: Spiritan Publications, 1996, 24-6.

¹⁶ Bolaji Idowu.....check library.

¹⁷ Gehman, Richard. *Doing African Christian Theology*. Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1987, 1.

Impact of African Religious and Cultural Values to African Christian Theology

The background check into major benchmark on African traditional religion and values offer a veritable common to appreciating the existence of the prolegomena to African Christian theology. Common elements which can serve as starters and continuity for discussion on this subject-matter that provide good material for theological reflection include; God the supreme being, Spirits, Ancestors, ethics, Evil Spirits, Demons and their human allies, the Witches, the human mediators and the community. However, I wish to highlight on a few of them to demonstrate my claim.

God the Supreme Being

Christian scripture teaches that God is transcendent and immanent, sovereign and distinct from his created universe. He is wholly other”, self-sufficient, and independent. “His thoughts are far above ours” (Isa. 55:8-9). In the various African traditions, this understanding is not alien or foreign. There were concepts of deity, and the different African groups had their names of God, and sometimes one community had several description names expressing the various qualities that were attributed to the deity. Africans who come to the Christian faith already have a belief in the existence of God and the spirit world. Martin Nwafu states, “the reality of God does not constitute a problem for African thought. Evidence for the African belief in God can be seen in the variety of names for God among all African people, as well as in religious beliefs and practices, rituals and sacrifices.”¹⁸ Thus, all African peoples had some notion of God as the Supreme Being, the unique creator, and controller of the universe. Other attributes of God include; knows all things, present everywhere, everlasting, holy and merciful¹⁹. This belief in transcendent being paved the way for the acceptance of Christian religion in the African soil. Adamo David enunciates that the basic structure of African traditional religion amongst the Yoruba people of Nigeria has the Supreme Being as the head of all things, the creator and the controller, the everlasting, the omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent and ever-acting God, even if all divinities and the ancestors became

¹⁸ Martin, Nkafu Nkemkia. *African Vitalogy: A Step Forward in African Thinking*. Nairobi: Paulines Publication, 1999, 144.

¹⁹ Richard, Gehman. *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible*. Jos: ACTS, 2001, 146-7.

silent. Like in the Old Testament, the basic belief in the Supreme Being, God, is not disputed all over Africa.²⁰

A great contributor to modern African Christian theology Nyamiti Charles argues that Christian faith has something to learn from the understanding of God found in African traditional religions. There is the richness in the praise-names and symbolism applied to God in African culture. For instance, the symbol of the motherhood of god found in some African cultures observes Nyamiti complement the biblical imagery of the Father of God and opens a deeper understanding of the nature of the Deity.²¹

Moral and Ethics Values

African man and woman are a moral being and ethical in their daily intercourse. Samuel Waje asserts that most Africans are pride to locate their moral principles as coming from God and so does Christian ethics acknowledge that God is the source of ethics.²² Their moral ethics are beliefs and assumptions that determine behaviour. Failure to understand key elements that regulate African morality led many western missionaries to misinterpret African moral life in general. In Africa ascends Waje, western missionaries saw African with a second wife an immoral person living in adultery. The fact that his polygamy was public and endorsed by his society was taken to show that African people are very immoral and have no sense of shame.²³ Other aspects of African morality is expressed in their taboos and customs. Moral values or code of conduct serve the purpose of maintaining order and binding the community together under the transcendent being and supervised by the elders and ancestors. These norms and codes of conduct can be seen as moral values. Fundamentally, say Awolalu and Dopamu, moral values are the fruits or offspring of religion and not just human interventions, and that is why their source of origin is the gods.²⁴

In Africa society, ethical principles and rules guiding daily relationships with fellow human beings and the divine Deity have been preserved over the ages in

²⁰ David, T. Adamo. "Christianity and the African Traditional Religions". erbumeteclesia.org.za/index.php/ve/article/view/285/808. Accessed 12/03/2020. Web.

²¹ Awolala, J. Omosade & P. Adelumo Dopamu. *West African Traditions Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonoje press, 1979, 47-51.

²² Waje, Samuel Kunhiyop. *African Christian Ethics*. Jos: Hippobooks, 2008, 66

²³ Waje, 7.

²⁴ Awolala & Dapamu 212.

various customs and traditions that provide explanations of the reasons, motivations, values and purpose of behaviour.²⁵ So when the Christian religion of the European preached theft, murder, corruption, injustice and others as immoral, the African man was comfortable because, he upheld these ethical codes long before the coming of Christian faith.

Morality and ethics are of the essence to African religion and values. Clifford Geertz quotes Larenti Megasa who sees it as intimately connected to religious belief and as the very expression of religious belief system²⁶. This suggests that African moral ethics are sacred, and they determine the wellbeing of the individuals and community in relation with the supreme Being in whose judgment man's destiny lies. The sacred does not only encourage commitment, Geertz suggests but demands it. Ethical commitment is ultimately anchored in the people's conception of God who is Holy, and in their interpretation of what God demands of them in real life. In African traditional religion the most general moral argument seems to be "as God is and does, so human beings must be and do this informs the Ten commandments demanded by the Christian God and for which Jesus ascends I have not come to abolish the law and prophet but to fulfil them."²⁷

An important aspect of African religious values is a sense of justice and moral rectitude. Justice in the context of the African people is not understood in the one directional perspective of *suum cuique tribuere* "to each his due" which the West adopted from Aristotle. Justice is rather considered as the biblical Greek *dikaiosune* (righteousness). If we take it to Igbo context it will read: *ikwuba aka oto* whose literal meaning is "keeping one's hand straight" will connote, uprightness. This is why justice plays a central role in one's moral rectitude in African worldview. Being upright becomes the basis of all moral behavior including that of giving one, one's due.²⁸

²⁵ Waje, 9.

²⁶ Megasa, Laurent. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1998, 14.

²⁷ Megasa, 45.

²⁸ Nwafor, Matthew Ikechukwu. "Integrating African Values with Christianity: A Requirement for Dialogue between Christianity and African Culture." *Mgbakoigba, Journal of African Studies*. Vol.6 No.1. July 2016, 4.

Therefore, there are profound African moral and ethical values that can enrich the building of African theology, but misconception and error has turned it against instead. The error of ignorance is that witlessness in the missionaries that made them oblivious of the fact that most of what comprise African religious values and culture form a preparatory ground for the success and blossom of Christian teaching and practice in Africa. An awareness of this would have led the missionaries into a proper and fitting dialogue between the Gospel and African culture to give birth to authentic theology. The error of ignorance becomes a missing point because the same continuity that made Christianity a second nature to western life was denied the African people and their culture leading to the confusion and crisis in the identity of African Christians. The reason is that the foundation on which the missionaries would have built the Gospel was destroyed by them in ignorance, prejudice and misapprehension. The corner-stone of this foundation is the African “positive” cultural values.²⁹ Consequently, we should not be in a hurry to forget that before the encounter of Christianity with African traditional religion and cultural values, it had the notion of God and moral laws which aid the people in their meeting with the supernatural and in good actions that necessarily accrue from that. Christianity simply comes to enlighten the obscure and misty ways of this culture and not to destroy it.

Rituals and Sacrifices

Ritual is a set form of carrying out a religious function or ceremony. It is a means of communicating something of religious significance through word, symbol, and action. Ritual go along with sacrifices made for specific purposes. There are innumerable rituals and sacrifices in African religion. Some concern the life of the individual from birth to after death. This is personal rituals. Others are agricultural rituals for instance farming rituals, planting rituals, first fruit rituals. Africans have also health rituals for healing and curing of bareness and removal of impunities among people.³⁰ Through the ritual action and word, people feel able to exercise a certain amount of control over the invisible world and forces of nature.³¹ Both sacrifice and ritual involve the setting apart of an item, usually associated with human use, for the supernatural powers. The sacrifice and offering says Megasa gain value because of the what the items represent. The

²⁹ Nwafor, 5.

³⁰ Mbiti, John. *Introduction to African Religion*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1971, 126-35.

³¹ Mbiti, 126.

offerer identifies with the items use for ritual and sacrifice.³² The fundamental meaning of sacrifices and offering lies in their efficacy to restore wholeness to humanity and creation. Just the finality of all ritual and sacrifice is God, it can be said with clarity that God is the final recipient of all sacrifices in African traditional religion. Except in certain cases, especially expiation of a major wrong-doing or for the purpose of averting a major affliction, sacrifice is made directly to God, more often sacrifices are offered to specific spirits such as ancestors to gain strength against the power of witches. Most of these sacrifices and rituals could be located explicitly or implicitly in the Christian religious practices. This aspect of African religious and cultural practice contributed to a large extent to the acceptance and fast growth and development Christianity in African soil.

Despite all these positive thoughts associated with ritual and sacrifices African practices construed with a lot of error of misconception which linked directly to the superiority complex of the western missionaries that resulted into their false conception of African people as less human, people without any idea of God or any spiritual reality even of the devil and with no sense of morality. The consequence of all these misrepresentations was the gigantic fallacy of assuming most of what they possess and practice as inheritance from the devil and accordingly, to be done away with. The missionaries as reported Nwafor were even accused of going as far as describing the African soil as a den of the devil replete with devilish ritual sacrifices.³³ The image from some quarters of missionary was that traditional religion was evil heathen customs that amounted to nothing more than the propitiation of the Devil and the practice of witchcraft and sorcery through evil spirits. However, in the real sense there is great continuity of these ritual sacrifices to the Christian mode and conception of connection with the divine. On a positive note, rituals and sacrifices aided the potential growth of Christianity in the sub-Sahara Africa region.

Ancestral Cults

Cult of Ancestor is like the sainthood in Christian faith. Their role and image are much same. African people Parrinder acknowledges, generally believe that death is not the end of human life. A person continues to exist in the hereafter.³⁴ This

³² Megasa, 182.

³³ Nwafor, 4.

³⁴ Parrinder, Geoffrey. *West African Religion*. London: Epworth Press, 1978, 115.

continuation of life beyond death is recognised through a very widespread practice of remembering the departed, which is found throughout Africa communities. Not only are the ancestors revered as past heroes, but they are felt to be still present, watching over the household and their influence are felt in the community. In many countries notes Mbiti "Sierra Leone, Ghana, Uganda, Nigeria and elsewhere, there are often family shrines in the homestead or behind the houses set apart for remembering the departed".³⁵ Ancestorship is an act of communion in remembrance that is also actualization or resurrection. Ancestors and their descendants on earth are in perpetual continuity. In a greater sense, as Igor Kopytoff quoted by Mbiti notes, "ancestors are perceived in the same way as the living elders of the society as far as the experience of kinship and communion is concerned."³⁶

In many parts of Africa, adult members of the family and particularly heads of family pour out meals such as beer and food on the ground as a libation invoking the spirits of the family ancestors for protection in the family. It is the custom in some parts of Africa to invoke the names of departed relative at prayer to God. These departed members of the family are believed to relay the prayer to God, since it is considered rude to approach God directly unless it is absolutely necessary says Mbiti.³⁷ The dead or ancestors are remember in variety of ways such as naming children after their name which is the practice in Christian baptismal names. They are equally consulted in moments of decision-making, in ceremonies and rituals such as those that mark the birth and initiation of children. Since the cult of ancestors resemble the veneration of saints in the church, Africans found no fault in welcoming Christian faith into their religious life.

Religious Symbols

Religious symbols are arts or objects that represent a complex set of ideas at different levels which gives room to diverse theological, doctrinal, philosophical interpretations. Ritualistic symbols are used to instruct and indoctrinate the devotees about the article of their faith, and it is mostly liturgical. In point of fact, it was the non-understanding of traditional African religious arts and symbols that partly contributed to the way in which some of the early Western scholars

³⁵ Mbiti, 123.

³⁶ Igor, Kopytoff. "Ancestors as Elders in Africa". P. B Hammond ed. *Cultural and Social Anthropology: Introduction Readings in Ethnology*. New York: Macmillan, 195, 282-91.

³⁷ Mbiti,125.

investigating African thought forms looked at the African indigenous beliefs in a derogatory manner. They branded the religious symbols as either objects of heathenism, paganism, idolatry, fetish or juju interpretations, which are couched in racial, and moral prejudice against the Africans relationship between Symbols and Religion.³⁸ African symbols connote religious purposes and meanings. For instance, in Urhobo tradition, symbolic art objects and processes are used in expressing religious ideas and beliefs. Objects which are used to communicate religious truth are many. One of such is the Cowries. This symbolize prosperity. Cowries are among the cultic items found in the shrine. Cowries symbolize the bride's wealth which the man pays during marriage rites; they also symbolize the money the departed soul will use to transport itself to the spiritual world. Moreover, they symbolize piety and ritual purity.³⁹

Another object of symbol is the palm fronds. Traditionally, they symbolize sacredness and they are used to mark and consecrate entrances to shrines. Whenever a young palm frond is spread, it depicts a place that has been specifically marked, consecrated and set aside for a divine being. The marking serves as a warning to non-initiates to keep away from the place. It is also believed that the young palm fronds are garment of some divinities. Another important symbol is the Iron. It symbolizes the power of justice, fair-play and war. It is associated with Ogun the tutelary divinity of hunters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, drivers and all workers of iron and steel. No hunter goes on an expedition in Africa without paying due regard to the divinity; no driver in Yoruba, for example, considers himself safe until offering is made to Ogun.

Of importance is the use of White chalk (Kaolin). This symbolizes the purity, and holiness of the object of worship. It also depicts the purity, piety, and faithfulness required of the devotee. In view of its purity, lumps of it kept in a shrine for a considerable length of time, are believed to attract sacred power from the divine being in the shrine. It is believed in Urhobo that each time a divinity or an ancestor visits the shrine set up for it, its spiritual power would infuse the whole place and purify all the materials that are kept in the place, especially those that are in the "holy of holies" and this includes the white chalk. Hence, it is believed

³⁸ Nabofa, M. Y. *Symbolism in African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Paper Back Publisher Ltd, 1994, 4.

³⁹ Oтите, Onigu. *The Urhobo People*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1982, 9.

that the white chalk is capable of cleansing all ills and impurities from the believers. It also protects them from all forms of negative forces and influences. For these reasons, chalk is always used to anoint devotees, given to them to lick and keep to protect them from impending danger.⁴⁰ Importantly, symbols of religious art could help in accomplishing higher mystical exercise and spiritual development, such as divination, medication and education. For example, a diviner who uses water, mirror, lobes of kola nut or cowries during divination, usually develops higher spiritual intellectual ability to solve human problem. This further highlights the submission of Ezenweke and Ogada that the use of symbols in certain ritual situations can create the impression of identity between the symbol and the symbolized. They give an instance, that when the traditional Igbo elder feeds his *ofò* ritual stick or *ikenga* with chewed kola-nut, he addressed his *ofò* directly in prayer and by so doing assumes a relationship of identity between the stick and the spirit force that is believed to be acting through the stick.⁴¹

The Christian religion is abounding with symbols of various kinds for religious purposes. Symbols communicate ideas, values that transcends physical properties of the object mediates between the living and the divine being. Hence, symbols enrich the growth of African Christian theology from the inception of Christianity in Africa. It is appropriate to repeat the words of saint John Paul II: "the synthesis between culture and faith is not only a requirement of culture, but also of faith, because a faith that does not become culture is a faith that is not fully accepted, not fully thought through, and not faithfully lived."⁴² In John Paul II's thought, the rapport between faith and cultural values is often presented as circular or reciprocal. The fact that the faith is not identified with a specific culture is precisely that which permits it to *become culture*, to be inculturated. The above key aspects of African religious beliefs and cultural values can enrich the doing of African Christian theology.

⁴⁰ Otite, 11.

⁴¹ Ezenweke, Elizabeth Onyedinma & Ogada Chibueze Charles. "Symbols and Symbolism in African Traditional Religion". Ezenweke, Elizabeth Onyedinma, Kanu Ikechuwu Anthony (Eds). *Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy*. Jos: Fab Anieh, 2012, 152.

⁴² Joh Paul II. Letter for the Formation of the Pontifical Council for Culture, May 20, 1982.

Challenges Confronting the Development of African Christian Theology

First of all, African Christian theology has the duty to deconstruct Christian missionaries' mentalities towards Africans. With great dismay Western missionaries who came to Africa had their biases towards African religious values, cultures, languages, traditions, beliefs, customs, rites, thoughts, and ways of worshiping. They gave rich ways of life bad connotations such as fetishism, barbarism, unfaithful, people with no culture and with no critical thinking. Tshibangu Tarcisse, enunciates "Christianity is a means of social and political disintegration; it is a means of colonization, or a form of Western modern imperialism; it is responsible for the death of the cultures of the regions where it has been preached".⁴³ As a result, Missionaries repudiated African worldviews and reduced them as sub-humans and as such suppressed their dignity and identity. This remains a challenge in doing African theology because many theologians and Africans still uphold the claim that African religious and cultural values as incompatible with Christian gospel. More of enlightenment studies about African anthropology needs to done in this direction.

The second challenge to doing African theology is to reconstruct African Christian theology. First of all, there is a need to build a bridge between African traditional religions and Christianity. By this I mean bridging the gap between African traditional values that are key in African religions and cultures today and Christian values. Kwame Bediako, the prime African theological inquires "what is the past of the African Christian? What is the relationship between Africa's old religions and her new one?"⁴⁴ The past of African Christians might have a lot to contribute to Christianity; this means that, African religions have a couple of values that are key to improve and renew African Christianity in order to make it relevant to African contexts. To this, Kwame argues "the African

⁴³ Tshibangu Tarcisse. "Towards an African-Coloured Theology in 21st Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers". Benezet Bujo & Junena Iluga Muya (Eds). Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2003, 186.

⁴⁴ Kwame, Bediako. "Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century. Issues in African Christian Theology". Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw and Tite Tienou (Eds). Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998, 59.

church needed to build its bridges to the revelation given to Africans in their pre-Christian and pre-missionary religious traditions of the past”.⁴⁵

Consequently, if this is well-done, we will improve many things in Christian ways of worship. Kwesi maintains that “apart from music, traditional religious-cultural symbols are beginning to be used to great effect in the church and traditional drums have found their way into churches and are used to the great advantage”⁴⁶. African traditional rites that are relevant to the current situations and contexts some of the rites that can be mentioned are traditional weeding, burial rites, drummer, songs, food, drinks, dance, litany of ancestors, and many other rites are to be welcomed into Christian liturgy. For Kwame, “If Christianity is to change its status from that of resident alien to that of citizen, then it must become incarnate in the life and thought of Africa, and its theologies must bear the distinctive stamp of mature African thinking and reflection”.⁴⁷ This will enrich African Christian life and believers will connect with Jesus more than it has been in the past.

Furthermore, African Christian theology might be context related. Theology is not foreign to the culture it is being done into; it is always linked with cultural meanings. As such, it has to demonstrate effort to gain deeper understanding through intellectual, critical, and scientific discoveries. Theology must have a pastoral intention so as to be useful to deal with people’s problems, and it is not divorced from the teaching of the universal Church. For Kwame, African theologians have demonstrated that the African religious experience and heritage were not illusory, and that they should have formed the vehicle for conveying the Gospel verities to Africa.⁴⁸ Notably, that there is no culture that is a way to reach God; western culture or civilization is not a way nor is African traditional religions; cultures are simply means. Christ must be seen as the only way and that there are no several ways; thus, each culture must follow Him in its context and worldview. There is no culture that is superior to others to explain better the mystery of salvation. As the document of the second Vatican Council

⁴⁵ Kwame, Bediako. *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*. Yaoundé: Editions Clé and Regnum Africa, 2000, 54.

⁴⁶ Kwesi, A. Dickson. *Theology in Africa*. London: Longman and Todd, 1984, 117.

⁴⁷ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*. Yaoundé: Editions Clé and Regnum Africa, 2000, 64.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

puts it “in harmony with the economy of the incarnation, the young churches will borrow from their customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and discipline, all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator and dispose the Christian life the way it should be”.⁴⁹ Therefore, to reconstruct a theology that is better for Africa, there is a need for treasuring African worldviews, thoughts, and ways of living. This theology must be culturally oriented without violating the original meaning of the text found in the holy Bible.

The Third challenge in doing African Christian theology is to redeem African appropriate identity. According to Tienou, “Wittingly or unwittingly, missions in Africa contributed to the making of the Black man into the White man; that is why the quest for African theology is also a quest for selfhood and emancipation”⁵⁰. For instance, Joseph E. Harris notes how in the translation of a Hebrew manuscript of Benjamin ben Jonah, a twelfth century merchant and traveler, a widespread opinion about the blacks was recorded thus:

There is a people ... who, like animals, eat of the herbs that grow on the banks of the Nile, and in the fields. They go about naked and have not the intelligence of ordinary men. They cohabit with their sisters and anyone they find... these sons of Ham are black slaves.⁵¹

Given that this identity was suppressed, the task of African Christian theology is to restore it by reshaping the curriculum in high schools, seminaries and universities. According to Gehman, “the Church of Jesus Christ in Africa must seek God’s answers to her problems and needs unique to her own context”.⁵² This is important because the curricula Africa uses currently are to a large extent Western oriented. Western-trained African theologians suffer indoctrination of Western priorities and methodologies. Many of the most successful African

⁴⁹ *Documents of Vatican Council II: “Decree on The Missionary Activity of the Church, Ad Gentes.”*

James Kroeger H. M.M. (Ed). Passay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2011), 699.

⁵⁰ Tienou, Tite. *The Common Roots of African Theology and African Philosophy. Issues in African Christian* Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw and Tite Tienou (Eds *Theology*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998, 45.

⁵¹ Harris E. Joseph. *Africans and their History*. USA: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987, 17.

⁵² Gehman, J. Richard. *Doing African Christian Theology: An Evangelical Perspective*. Nairobi: Evangelical Publishing House, 1987, 22.

academics are not in touch with their own traditional cultural heritage; they may not even speak their own mother tongues, which could help shape their theological thinking. African philosophy and religions are to be given an important role in African academia so that students are equipped with a critical thinking. For Samuel Ngewa, "African theology must not see itself as heir to the system of values belonging to theologians foreign to Africa. It must rather try to bring in Christ and not Christian doctrines into this African universe".⁵³ To test the water, African Christian theology must combine an understanding of the thought patterns, worldviews of the people in African context. As such theology will not remain the matter of mental assent but will be properly lived by the people in their everyday lives.

The fourth challenge to the development of African theology in my view lies on the denominational differences found between Catholic and Protestant theologies. Catholicism and Protestantism have distinct views on the meaning and the authority of the Bible. For Protestant Christians, Luther made clear that the Bible is the "Sola Scriptura," God's only book, in which He provided His revelations to the people and which allows them to enter into communion with Him. Catholics, on the other hand, do not base their beliefs on the Bible alone. Along with the Holy Scripture, they are additionally bound by the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholics' views on the spiritual office are reflected in the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, a rite commemorating the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples before his crucifixion. Once consecrated by a priest in the name of Jesus, bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. Non-Catholics may not participate in Communion. In the Protestant Church, every baptized person is invited to share and is allowed to lead the Lord's Supper. This approach is not accepted by Catholics. There are many major theological issues that have varied understanding between the catholic and protestant Christian churches.

The fifth and the last challenge for African theology is its variety in theological approaches and methods. There seems to be no acceptable approach to doing African theology by African theologians. Black theology that emerged from south African puts emphasis on the socio-economic and political context of the

⁵³ Ngewa, Samuel. *The Validity of Meaning and African Theology. Issues in African Christian Theology.*

Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw and Tite Tienou (Eds Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998, 53.

Christian gospel with a view to stimulating Christian action. Thus, theology is essentially orthopraxis or right action, that aims to expose the evils and conflicts in society and thus change its unequal structures.⁵⁴ Again, while catholic theologians and researchers stress that the source of African theology is more of philosophical in nature, their protestant counterparts emphasize African and Christian tradition to be the source of African theology.⁵⁵ Differences in methods and approaches show that African Christian theology take different forms, hence no single approach. The methodology emerges from different circumstances in which the theologian finds himself/herself thereby having something relevant to say to those different situations.

Conclusion

The study of African Christian Theology brings to light a number of interesting, sometimes excruciating, dichotomies, many of which penetrate its very nature, threatening the whole exercise. This journey has made a claim that African Theology shall be understood in an inclusive sense as embracing the dichotomy between African Traditional Theology and African Christian Theology and the inevitable tension between the particular and the general. Thus, African Theology covers all local theologies produced by any context in sub-Saharan Africa, whatever their general validity or their intellectual origin. African theology can be free to return to the complexity of its own religious resources in order to find its commonality with the rest of the universe. That Christian faith has come to stay in Africa leaves no doubt as it is visibly clear to all around. But the challenge is how this widespread religion can be lived authentically by many Africans in such a manner that they become truly Africans as well as truly Christians with neither of the identities losing its character. What should be clearly understood is that Christian religion is not anathema to any culture but, like the incarnate Savior, it is willing to identify with all cultures in order to salvage its anomalies without itself losing its prime nature. Sarpong was plain on this when he stated that "Christianity's claim to universality is validated, only when it can be expressed in any cultural form".⁵⁶

⁵⁴ John, Parratt. *A Reader in African Christian Theology*. New Edition. Great Britain: SPCK, 2001, 144.

⁵⁵ Parrat, 143.

⁵⁶ Peter K. Sarpong. "Emphasis on Africanizing Christianity". Teresa Okure et.al (Eds). *Inculturation of Christianity in Africa*. Nairobi: Amecea Gaba Publishers, 1990, 108.