THE GOSPEL AND AFRICAN CULTURAL FORMS

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Introduction

THE TOPIC, THE GOSPEL and African cultural forms, is obviously vast and complex, which leaves it open to several interpretations. In the present context, it is understood as the contact between the gospel (the Good News of salvation) and the African culture, taken as an entity, distinct from any other culture.

Contact of the gospel with any culture has always implied attempts by the gospel bearers, i.e. the missionaries, to build local churches as the most appropriate means of disseminating the gospel message. Generally, this process is determined by the demands and expectations of the 'mother' church, to whom the missionaries in the field are always accountable. This is evident, from the kind of information required of the local ordinaries in their Quinquennial Reports. No doubt categories such as: 'Baptisms each year', 'Catechumens', 'Easter communion duty', 'Marriages each year', are deemed necessary for achieving orthodoxy of evangelization, ensuring perpetuation of the acclaimed distinctive image of the (Catholic) Church as 'One'. These specifics also point to the tendency to reckon the strength, i.e. the growth, of the local church by numbers of the sacramentalized. To a certain extent, this tendency still persists.

However, *the signs of the times* clearly indicate that the Church is facing serious challenges to its established form of evangelization, in Africa in particular, and especially on the issues of human rights – including religious rights – issues which are of universal import. This highlights one vital sociological fact: societies (of whatever nature and extent) are organized by laws, some of which approximate to gospel values. Thus in any attempt to establish local churches, cognizance must be taken of a particular society's value system, since this value system influences the members more than that of ecclesiology. Hence an enquiry into the African case is urgent.

It is urgent and necessary because, in the ordinary African's view, their church remains a replica of the Church in the West, and therefore

needs to be 'Africanized'. This is spelt out in the *Message* of the AMECEA and IMBISA bishops[1] given at the close of the African Synod:

> We realise that Christians do not always feel at home as a family in the Church, that we do not always accept each other in the way that members of the same family should. We asked ourselves why this is so, and we had to admit that the values of Christ have not yet been integrated with our own African values. Our traditional African values, which still affect us at the deepest levels of our being, in spite of the passing of so many of our traditional ways through the influence of modern life, have not been sufficiently touched by our Christianity nor has our way of being Christians become fully African. (n 2)

This statement is regarded as an open confession of the real situation: that the Gospel has yet to be rooted firmly on the African soil. In other words, Africa is 'in transition to inculturated Christianity'. Thus, I welcome this opportunity to contribute towards the story of evangelization in Africa, taking as my main focus the social implications of how Christianity is challenged by African culture, and vice versa.

PART I

This section re-examines missionary activity in Africa prior to Vatican II. I begin with a reflection stemming from a singular event that took place in Nairobi, Kenya, in November 1993. It was the celebration and remembrance of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Bishop Joseph Shanahan CSSp, founder of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary, and widely acclaimed as an outstanding missionary. He pioneered in what was then known as Southern Nigeria from 1905 till ill health forced him to retire from the scene in 1932. Personal involvement in this celebration resulted in my understanding the coming of missionaries to Africa as a *revisit* by God. It is a *re*visit because, for one thing, Africans had met God before, have had and continue to have experience of God.

In Africa, the act of revisiting is usually associated with a 'minor', and is undertaken at the invitation, express or implicit, of the 'senior'. The major exception is bereavement when nobody, not even the 'minor', would wait for a special invitation to pay a visit to condole with the bereaved.

Moreover, a revisit is seen as a ritual and is symbolic. In Nigeria, for example, this symbolism is depicted in the ritual of the kola nut, always offered to, and expected by, the person being visited. To break kola nut

with someone symbolizes acceptance of the person, and a wish for their continued 'good' health, among other things. In the context of social relations, a revisit implies, first and foremost, confirmation of the value of the initial interaction to either party. It also connotes openness and willingness to acquire in-depth knowledge and understanding of the other, thus facilitating a stronger bond of friendship. Furthermore, one or more revisits, in situations of conflict or stress, are expected to prove productive in terms of the conflict being resolved, which assumes *conversion of heart resulting in reconciliation.*

In our present context, however, there is a reversal of roles, so to speak. Thus, the party undertaking the act of revisiting is God and the party being revisited is the African church and the African society of which this church is part. More importantly, God's gesture of revisiting is purely arbitrary and unsolicited. It is not an invitation from either the African or the 'agents' through whom God has decided to revisit, at whatever time and under whatever circumstances (cf especially 1 Jn 4: 9–10).

Historically, the Africa that witnessed the arrival of the first missionaries on its soil, in the last century, was mainly rural in structure, and life was strongly community-oriented – egalitarianism was the order of the day. To some extent this community orientation still characterizes Africa, despite modern developments, including urbanization. It was also the Africa that was gradually recovering from the ravages of the slave trade, following the mass return from Europe and America of emancipated slaves to their original homes in Africa. Ironically, trafficking in slaves within Africa itself still continued, especially in the coastal regions, and the early missionaries, inspired by Leo XIII's Encyclical Letter *In plurimis* (1888), were much involved in the process of its eradication.

Two facts are significant about the missionaries who came to christianize Africa. Firstly, most of them belonged to religious orders. The essence of religious life then was, and still is, vowed life in community under the legitimate authority or superior to whom one is accountable for one's entire life. The ultimate aim was understood as individual holiness and, therefore, salvation.

Closely related to this was the European preoccupation with the 'monastic spirituality of prayer'. Monastic prayer, technically referred to as *opus Dei*, is highly structured, very specific as to the time and manner of recitation. This contrasted strongly with the African spirituality of prayer which is life-centred. Community prayer is situational, the occasion determining the actual nature of the prayer. The African

pattern of prayer may be described as informal rather than formal, and any occasion of traditional public prayer invariably involves some form of celebration or other. This does not in any way imply absence of seriousness or solemnity; the fact that prayer is built into every rite of passage – birth, puberty, marriage, death – bears out this point.

The early Christian communities were interesting. The first missionaries, as I mentioned earlier, bought back slaves from the open markets. Unsurprisingly, the first converts emerged from this category of Africans. In most cases, however, these African converts were 'foreigners' to the locality, and consequently their natural need for rehabilitation had to be met by their liberators, the missionaries.

The problem of rehabilitation eventually led to the system of 'Christian villages'. These villages were within accessible distance of the mission compound, and usually comprised separate living quarters for the converts. Contemporary accounts speak of rigid rules and regulations – set hours of prayer, meals, rest and so on – and of isolation from the neighbourhood. With time, however, this type of institution had to be abandoned because of its social implications, especially for the African who was native to the place. Membership of the 'Christian village' at the cost of isolation or separation from one's natural environment was assessed as an unreasonable price to pay for joining such a community.

Of even greater interest was the process of making converts. Usually it involved emphasis on administration of sacraments, in particular baptism and penance, after some catechism instruction. In general the medium of instruction was, and still is, the local language, especially in the rural areas. Hence arose the need of the 'office' of 'catechist', associated more with men than women in the early years. The catechist, himself a convert, played a double role of interpreter and catechism instructor. The decision as to who received baptism and when rested solely on the missionary-in-charge. This particular administrative practice was also followed in the case of church marriages. To receive baptism a person was required to assume a 'Christian' (i.e. Western) name, in preference to an indigenous one. From the start, this was seen as lacking in sensitivity, since indigenous names are symbolic among many Africans. (This legislation was modified by Vatican II and implementation is now left to the discretion of the local ordinaries.) Formal initiation into the Christian community involved serious instruction in the Gospels, while permanent membership required 'monogamous' marriage, among other things.

The universal style of catechesis of the day was legalistic. Thus the teaching and preaching tended to centre on the issue of being 'saved',

and as an individual, through keeping the Ten Commandments of God and the Seven Precepts of the Church. Meticulous observance of these merited one heaven (eternal life), while non-observance of them merited one hell (eternal punishment). As I will explore later, traditional African understanding of sin is as anti-social behaviour. Hence this new emphasis on individual sin and salvation would have seemed an anomaly.

A vital aspect of gospel proclamation was, and still is, prayer. The missionaries tended to emphasize more 'devotional prayer'. The many sodalities or devotional movements initially proved attractive, but with time they were experienced as less and less relevant to daily life. The exception is the rosary, still the focus of meetings today, even of youth groups. Occasionally, priests complain that, more often than not, people (even in urban areas) prefer to say their rosary than follow the eucharistic celebration. The explanation for such a phenomenon may be partly found in the African concept of mediatorship, a topic yet to be fully explored.

A hierarchy of priests and bishops is implicit in the establishing of Christian communities. As in education, early missionary achievements in this sphere are well attested to, especially by what is now described as the 'boom' in vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The largest seminary in the whole Christian world is located now in Africa – the Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu, Nigeria. Ironically, while the Catholic Church in Africa is being identified with the boom in vocations, Africa appears also to be 'booming' with independent churches and sects, some of which are composed of 'fallen Christians'.

Seminary formation warrants special mention. The majority of seminaries, including the Bigard, are diocesan, though several missionary congregations are steadily recruiting Africans into their midst. Understandably, the pattern of formation and life-style created by early missionaries was the western model. There has been no significant change. Views continue to be expressed that seminary training is concerned mainly with acquisition of paper qualifications rather than with preparing the trainees for life. In the context of widespread illiteracy, such a pursuit associated with a select group is questioned. The life-style of the priest is still associated with 'exclusive' living quarters, even in the midst of (city) hovels, though this statement may be regarded as something of a generalization. Another feature is mobility: in some parts of Africa diocesan priests are noted as 'owning' personal cars, which have become a status symbol.

But critical voices, including episcopal ones, have been raised, expressing the need for urgent reform of the seminary system to make

it relevant to pastoral ministry in modern social conditions. Among such voices is Raphael S. Mwana 'a Nzeki, Co-adjutor Archbishop of Nairobi[2] and Albert K. Obiefuna, Metropolitan Archbishop of Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province.[3]

This historical reflection would be incomplete without mention of the role played by the African conferences of bishops. With the impetus deriving from Vatican II (see below) and, perhaps, following Paul VI's challenge that Africans must now be missionaries to themselves,[4] the various bishops' conferences embarked afresh on the building of Christian communities under different names. Presumably it was expected that this experiment, now conducted almost wholly by indigenous hands, would yield a different, and more impressive result, so to speak.

The AMECEA needs specific mention. This conference body is notable for having evolved a 'most clearly articulated' programme for establishing Christian communities under the preferred name of 'Small Christian Communities' (SCCs). By 1976 the AMECEA bishops had adopted the policy of establishing SCCs as a pastoral priority. Some local successes were even noted in the recent African Synod. However, in spite of this fresh attempt, it does not appear generally that the task of building Christian communities *per se* has proved more 'productive' in indigenous hands, as the quote cited on the opening page implies.

With all the above in mind, we now turn to Part II of this paper.

PART II

The impetus of Vatican II

This section examines specifically how Christianity today, as actualized through the system of Christian communities, is challenged by African culture, and vice versa. First, a brief remark about the impetus provided by Vatican II.

Recently, the Council has been officially rated as an 'historic event (which) from the point of view of the history of salvation, [is] the cornerstone of the present century . . .'.[5] It is also assessed as 'truly a crucible of collegiality' at which the bishops 'sought to identify appropriate means of better sharing and making more effective their care of all the churches . . .'.[6] It is quite evident from the Council's Decree *Ad gentes*, issued immediately after the Assembly, that the 'appropriate means' identified by the bishops was the establishing of Christian communities. Our concern is with that section of the Decree dealing with mission work.

The section opened with the observation that the Church was aware of a 'tremendous missionary work' to be done. There were two billion

people in the world at that time (1965) who had never, or barely, heard of the gospel, and their number was increasing day by day. It further stated that these people constituted 'large and distinct groups united by enduring cultural ties, ancient religious traditions and strong social relationships'. The Church, therefore, 'must implant itself among all these groups' in order to fulfil perfectly its mission from Christ of revealing and communicating the love of God to all peoples (n 10). This process of implanting would be best achieved though 'Christian communities', the formation of which is noted as incumbent on all missionaries, including Africans (see n 10). Members of these com-munities are expected to give a good example by their way of life, to witness to the Word ('proclamation' of the gospel), to establish relationships of respect and love with the people among whom they live, *to acknowledge themselves as members of that group*, to be familiar with their natural and religious traditions, uncovering *'with gladness and respect those seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them'* (n 11, my italics).

This passage not only showed a marked advance in sociological understanding and appreciation of cultures other than western, it highlights the issue that has since become dominant: inculturation. More importantly, the covert admission that any people's traditional religion, African Traditional Religion (ATR) included, embodies 'seeds of the Word (the Gospel)', is a revelation. As with any revelation, adequate interpretation focuses more on the implicit than the explicit meaning. In light of all our earlier discussions, one would surmise that the implicit meaning is an urgent call to shift emphasis from uniformity in 'administering mission' to plurality in 'living mission'. This leads us to consider traditional African community as against Christian community.

Community and inclusiveness in African culture

Underpinning the African concept of community is the traditional belief-system. For the ordinary African, the term 'community' defines a group or discrete groups of people who interact, and are seen to interact, on a warm basis (unlike a 'society' which does not operate on such a basis). The ties of kinship rather than sheer geographical proximity invariably act as the moderating factor in social relations.

Further, community is thought of in terms of the living, the dead and the unborn, a definition encompassing traditional understanding of 'lineage', and, by extension, 'clan', which defines the limit of exogamy[7] in contradistinction to 'ethnic group' which is not exogamous.

Since Vatican II a great deal has been written about African cultural heritage in the context of missionary work. Among these, Paul VI's message to Africa, *Africae terrarum*, rightly noted that the outstanding component of this heritage is the African 'sense of solidarity and community', thus rendering further discussion on the relevance of community *per se* unnecessary. I wish to draw attention to one aspect of African understanding and practice of community which is not widely acclaimed: *inclusiveness*. It is central to African thought-patterns. In the context of relationships, inclusiveness would connote, on the one hand, what could be called 'life-rubbing' (which brings 'healing'), and on the other, 'accountability'.

The characteristic of inclusiveness is evident in several ways. It manifests itself in the African notion of the person, a topic apparently not popular with writers. Briefly, the African idea of the person is of an individual endowed with a specific identity, who at the same time forms an intrinsic part of the community within which the person's individuality is exercised. In addition, the measure of success of this exercise in any given situation is dependent on the individual's disposition towards the norms circumscribing any particular activity. Africans, like other peoples, do not conceptualize individual existence in a vacuum. Mbiti's well-known remark, 'I am because we are, and because we are, therefore, I am', bears out this point, as would the English saying, 'no man (or woman) is an island'.

The concept of inclusiveness underlies two closely related rights thought to inhere in a person: the right to 'life' and right to 'fame'. In the Igbo language, for example, these rights would be spoken of as *ndu*, which could be translated as 'continuance of existence' (understood as common to all created things); and *afa*, which translates as 'reputation', associated with remarkable achievement (understood as proper to an individual alone). As with all rights, there are obligations: to ensure perpetuation of life within the community, and to achieve a distinctive identity. In the context of African world-view, such a distinctive identity is equated with ancestorhood (which would symbolize survival of the person through offspring or generation). The African concept of community, therefore, does not reflect anonymity of membership. (The topic of ancestorhood/ancestor has become controversial and the constraints of the present paper do not allow participation in such a controversy.)

The feature of inclusiveness is also reflected in the notion of authority typical to Africa. Thus, authority is thought of as widely distributive, i.e., authority is not vested solely in an individual, but is

held collectively. In terms of decision-making, the process of wide consultation would be followed, with the aim of reaching a consensus. This would apply even in communities associated with kingship or chiefship.

At this stage it is necessary to remark that the African notion of authority is associated more with lineage than with the family-unit, even the polygamous. For our present purposes, the term 'lineage' would define a social unit consisting of a group of people who can trace actual descent from one ancestor or ancestress. The ties of kinship may be a basis for claims to land and other kinds of property, to mutual assistance on the pursuit of a common interest, to authority over others. They also impose obligations which complement these claims.

An intrinsic aspect of the notion of lineage is 'eldership', a term which is often misused in writings, so that some clarification is needed. In the view of the African traditionalist, the term 'eldership' or 'elder' would define age- or seniority-status and is equated with wisdom. To be designated an elder is to be regarded as an embodiment of (natural) wisdom or philosophy, traditional mores, integrity of life, and thus to be worthy of respect, frequent encounter and emulation. Even today, the missionary whose anniversary prompted my earlier reflection is referred to by the people among whom he worked as *onye-isi*, a term which approximates to elder.

From the point of view of exercising authority, eldership- or seniority-status is synonymous with ritual authority. More often than not, the elder is expected to preside over public celebrations but sacrifices at local shrines are usually performed by the priest, the guardian of the specific shrine. As against ritual, there is legal authority vested in the senior agnates ('representatives') of the discrete kinship or descent groups that compose the lineage. On this category of elders devolves the duty of deciding, as a group, about land issues and other property rights. However, such decisions are usually taken only after consultation with the lineage elder, except where such an individual is personally involved in the issue under consideration. This group also is responsible for ensuring that any office, i.e., leadership-role, is entrusted to the 'right' person. Jostling for positions of power and the practice of bribery are features of modern influences.

Inclusiveness is also underscored in the traditional process of initiation of an individual into public office. This could be deduced from the insignia associated with such an office: examples include the stool (Ashanti, Ghana), the *ofo* (Igbo, Nigeria). Such symbols embody the people's social history and thus their expectations of the office-bearer,

as ethnographies show. One very important expectation is the 'proper' exercise of authority. In the view of an ordinary African, as no doubt in that of others, authority is expected to point beyond itself. It is hardly ever expected to exhibit itself as an arbitrary naked power. This expectation is usually ensured through inbuilt control mechanisms (unfortunately interpreted in some writings as taboos) attaching to any office. The expectation underscores the issue of accountability, among other things.

The African notion of sin also reflects the feature of inclusiveness. As I mentioned, traditional understanding of sin is as anti-social behaviour. In most African communities the rites of 'purification of sin' are invariably of public concern, thus demonstrating African belief in interpersonal and community responsibility for sin. This belief is seen as quite akin to the authentic Christian understanding of *communio* as recovered in Vatican Council II. Perhaps it is helpful to mention here that the African belief-system does not reflect the idea of eschatology as understood by Christianity. It does, however, reflect concern for life, especially for a 'good life' *here and now*, which would result in achieving the distinctive status of ancestorhood (i.e. survival in the lineage).

African understanding and sense of hospitality witness to inclusiveness. Thus, visits and visitors are welcome at any time, even during mealtimes and without previous announcement. A key aspect of hospitality is celebration. John Paul II noted aptly that, 'In Africa it is unthinkable to celebrate a feast without the participation of the whole village' (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 43).

Challenges to Christianity

From all the above analyses the following obvious points emerge. African culture poses a great challenge to Christianity both in its concept and its practice of 'community'. First, the African idea of community underscores the 'worth' of every member. Thus by virtue of membership within a distinctive group, a person enjoys the right of individual achievement which is expected to reflect on the community. From our earlier observations (Part I), it is not obvious that the existing mode of administration associated with the Christian communities has proved conducive to achieving this distinction in the African sense. Experience shows that the phenomenon of 'anonymous Christians' remains a reality, in spite of Vatican II's *Apostolicam actuositatem* and John Paul II's *Christifideles laici* in particular. Rather, distinctive achievements seem to be associated especially with the clergy who

would be rated as the privileged class, i.e. the powerful, in contrast to the powerless, i.e. the majority of the faithful.

Second, authority and decision-making processes still operate on the hierarchical model at all levels of church administration. The African characteristic of wide consultation on matters of public interest is not followed, even though extensive indigenization of the clergy now marks the Church in Africa. Accountability continues to be directed to the (universal) 'legitimate authority' at the centre and not to the local Christian community. Third, with regard to hospitality and celebration, it is not obvious from experience that mission houses and compounds are often seen or experienced as welcoming to casual visitors or the uninvited guests. But this particular observation may be too general.

Last, the Church in Africa now boasts of a boom in vocations to the priesthood, as well as to the religious life. The Africans who have achieved, or are aspiring to achieve, the status of priest and sister, are invariably regarded as religious leaders, and accorded high status similar to their counterparts elsewhere. From earlier observations regarding the formation (and life-style) of these new religious leaders, it does not appear that present formation gears them towards acknowledging themselves as members of their local communities, as directed by Vatican II, the means by which they would, in practice, demonstrate their appreciation of the characteristic traditional African feature of inclusiveness in social relations.

The Christian challenge to African inclusiveness

A valid question at this stage would be about the challenge by Christianity to African culture. Since the focus of my paper has been on the issue of community, I would judge that Christianity challenges African culture in one fundamental respect: the notion of who composes, or should compose, community. The church community is open to all baptized persons, irrespective of race, while, as mentioned earlier, traditional community comprises only persons identified as kin, living, dead and unborn. Perhaps this would explain in part the observation attributed to a Nigerian bishop during the last Synod (1994), that the blood of kinship is thicker than the waters of baptism. It would not be out of place to mention here that the present writer has since had the privilege of interviewing this particular bishop on the statement. Asked what he sees as a solution to the problem of 'ethnicity' in general, he replied that the one solution lies in 'serious catechesis' regarding the 'supremacy of Christ's blood' which has purchased our 'salvation', and is thus 'much thicker than that of kinship'. To this I would add Christ's

fundamental teaching on family (or kinship ties), in the context of the cost of discipleship (Mk 3:31–35).

Concluding remarks

Vatican II provided a forum for reviewing the Church's mission of evangelization in general, while identifying the urgency of 'incultura-tion' in particular. Thirty years later, the African Synod produced what could be called a progress report on the same issue with regard to Africa. This report highlights one point of great interest: the apparent underestimation of the innate capacity of cultures, African included, to challenge Christianity, although Paul VI had drawn attention to this in *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975, no 20). Thus, as recorded, all the discus-sions at the Assembly hinged around one main task: 'delineating as clearly as possible' how the Church in Africa is to prove herself and her message (and by implication the 'agents' for disseminating this message) 'relevant' and 'credible' (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 21).

The Synod solution to that challenge is inferred from its *Message*: 'Each particular church and each baptized person is to *welcome the good news down to the roots of* his/her culture . . . and . . . carry it to all peoples, even to the ends of the earth' (*Message of the Synod*, 13). This statement again raises the issue of inculturation with all its demands, for the African Christian as for any other Christian. As the orientation of the present paper has reflected somewhat similar con-cerns, I conclude with the simple message: evangelization in today's Africa, with its multifaceted problems which are only too well known, must involve a renewed and concerted effort (especially on the part of the 'agents') at 'breaking barriers' and 'crossing frontiers' into the world of the 'other' (*a revisit*) – not simply crossing frontiers, but *abiding* with the 'other' in the strict sense of the term (cf Jn 15:5).

NOTES

[1] Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA); Inter-regional Meeting of Bishops of Southern Africa (IMBISA).

[2] Raphael S. Ndingi Mwana 'a Nkezi, 'Vocation and formation of priests', *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)* vol 32, 1 (1990), pp 17–28; also, 'The identity and ministry of priests today', AFER vol 32, 2 (1990), pp 230–239.

[3] Albert K. Obiefuna, *The harvest is rich but the labourers are few: towards a diocesan major seminary* (Snapp Press Ltd, Enugu, 1997).

[4] Cf Paul VI, Inaugural Address to SECAM, Kampala, 1969.

[5] John Paul II, 'The Church in Africa' (*Ecclesia in Africa*), 1995, n 2.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Exogamy: the marriage of a man outside his tribe.