

The Gospel in the African Cultural Context

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I: INTRODUCTION

1. Complexity of the African Context The African context is complex because of many factors. We can speak of the historical context in which the Gospel has been proclaimed and received, with the long histories of the 1,000 different peoples of Africa, full of activities like migrations, settlements, wars, and changes brought about by both human decisions and natural calamities. Upon these traditional histories came that of the colonial period, with European conquests and domination, followed by African struggles for independence and new nationhood. We can speak of the social context, with its many social systems and institutions. We can speak of the political context, with traditional African political systems and their encounter with European colonial systems, the attempt today to build new political systems that range from one-party governments to socialist systems, dictatorships, minority rule by immigrant population, and so on. We can also speak of the religious context, with the well established African religious heritage centred on the belief in God as Creator and Sustainer of all things, a strong awareness of the spiritual realities that intermingle with physical realities, and practical expressions of this deep religiosity in terms of prayer, making sacrifices, festivals, and the observance of ethical-moral values.

We take now the cultural context, being aware that it is only one out of these other contexts just enumerated. I will use 'culture' here to mean the human pattern of life in response to people's total environment. This pattern is expressed in physical forms such as agriculture, the arts, and technology; in interhuman relations of society, and in forms of reflection upon the total reality of life (such as language, religion, spiritual values, the riddle of life-

birth-death, and so on). In this respect, African culture is like any other culture in the world. We can speak of African cultural contexts, but I will use culture generically in the singular.

2. *God takes the initiative.* “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16). Here then, God in His love invades man in his culture. The Incarnation was God’s act of intercepting human and cosmic history. The Gospel was given to the whole world in the context and language of the culture and people of Israel, in the land of Palestine, two thousand years ago. Since then, the Gospel has been proclaimed, propagated and accepted within the cultural milieu of the peoples of the world. When the Gospel and culture meet, and if the Christian Faith is generated, then the product is Christianity.

3. *The Gospel enters and traverses culture.* Because the Gospel traverses culture, it moved from the Palestine of two thousand years ago, into all parts of the world today. Acts 2 is the classical record of how the Gospel and culture became intimate partners. “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues . . . And at this sound the multitude came together and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered saying . . . We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God,” (Acts 2:1-11). Here then is the Gospel being proclaimed, being understood, being believed by people in their different cultures throughout the world. So the Holy Spirit entrusted the Gospel into the hands of human cultures, and this divine arrangement has remained that way ever since.

African culture is one of these cultures to which God has entrusted the Gospel of His Son Jesus Christ, exactly as he entrusted it to the Jewish, Greek, Roman, German, American, Indian and other cultures of the world.

4. *African response to the Gospel.* Conversion to the Gospel takes place within a cultural framework. The Gospel has been and continues to be proclaimed within the melodies of our African culture — through the words of our one thousand languages, through the vibrant tunes of our ten thousand musical instruments, through the joyous rhythm of our bodies and the solemn symbols of our artists. It is within our culture that we are wrestling with the demands of the Gospel. It is within culture that God loves. Culture is the medium of receiving, diffusing, tuning in and relaying the Gospel. Without culture we would not hear the Gospel, we would not believe the Gospel, and we would not inherit the promises of the Gospel.

5. *The Gospel is not a cultural monopoly.* And yet, the relation between culture and the Gospel demands that no single culture should imprison the Gospel. The Gospel was first revealed and proclaimed in the Jewish culture, but soon it was proclaimed in the Greek and Roman cultures. So it went on, until eventually it reached our African culture — and it must go on, from culture to culture. Some cultures of the world have rejected the Gospel while others have restricted its effectiveness. The Gospel is a divine message coming into frail cultural vessels. African peoples have responded very

readily to the Gospel, and it is estimated that there are about 190 million Christians in Africa today (1978), representing about 45% of the entire population.

GOSPEL + CULTURE + FAITH produce CHRISTIANITY

GOSPEL

God-given
One, unique, holy

Universal — for all
Eternal, revealed in history

Makes new creation in Christ

Towards culture:

G. traverses c.
judges and saves c.
dedicates, sanctifies c.
beautifies c.
exorcises demons in c.

CULTURE

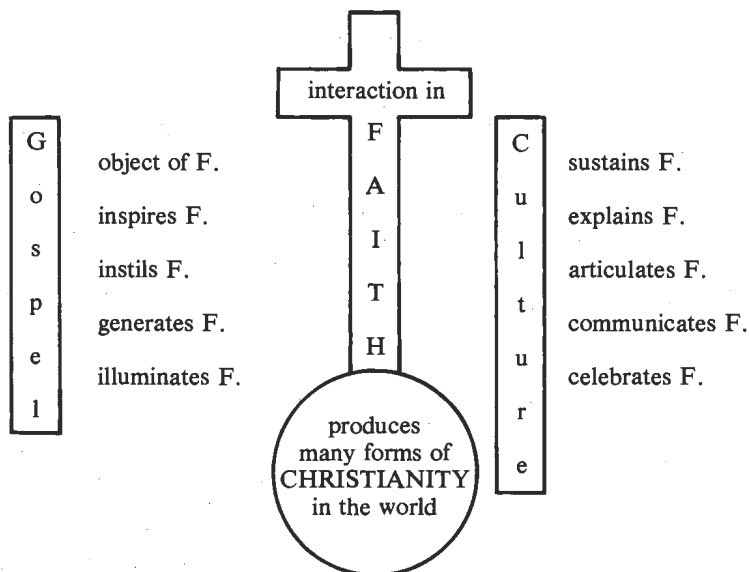
Man made, makes man culturally
Many local and regional forms, good,
evil, neutral elements

Universal — in all societies
Historical, changing, temporal, trans-
itory

Conditions people and reachable areas
of creation

Towards the Gospel:

C. receives (or rejects) G.
communicates G.
conditions peoples for Faith in G.
brings glory to G.



6. ***“He who has never travelled thinks that his mother is the only good cook in the world” (African proverb).*** It was very unfortunate, therefore, that Africans were told by word and example, by those who brought them the Gospel, that they first had to become culturally circumcized before they could be come Christians. There is no theological justification for this kind of burden. Already at the time of the Apostles the Gentile Christians faced a similar situation from some of the Jewish brethren who insisted that they should observe Jewish cultural habits. “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:2). But this approach was rejected by the Jewish Christians themselves in the early Church, (Acts 15:1-35). I wish that this wise example would have been observed by our brethren from overseas who brought the Gospel of Christ to Africa. Sometimes Africans have been pressured or hypnotised into being converted to a foreign culture, rather than to the Gospel.

The only lasting form of Christianity in Africa is that which results from a serious encounter of the Gospel with the indigenous African culture when the people voluntarily accept by faith the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A Christianity which is heavily intertwined with an imported culture may indeed be very impressive but it cannot be a sufficient substitute for the kind of Christianity that should grow out of the spontaneous free impregnation of the Gospel in the fertile womb of African culture. An African proverb reminds us that: “A bee does not start a new home with honey.” Therefore, even imported Christian honey, however sweet, will not be a sufficient basis for a permanent home for Christianity in Africa. It is necessary to cultivate a genuine Christianity which is truly **MADE IN AFRICA**. Otherwise **IMPORTED CHRISTIANITY WILL NEVER, NEVER QUENCH THE SPIRITUAL THIRST OF AFRICAN PEOPLES**. The wisdom of the forefathers speaks clearly about this, in another proverb: “That which comes from charity is never sufficient to fill the granary.” Africa wants and needs the Gospel. But Africa does not require imported Christianity, because too much of it will only castrate the people spiritually or turn them into spiritual cripples. The only tools needed to evolve a viable form of Christianity are: the Gospel, Faith and Culture. Thank God these three fundamental tools are found in plenty in Africa, as elsewhere.

II. AFRICAN CULTURE AND CHURCH LIFE

I see the specific relevance of African culture in the following areas of Church life.

1. *Worship:* Worship takes on many forms which are culturally determined. African culture needs to be studied, analysed, and utilised in the evolution of relevant spirituality and worship life of the Church. This has many aspects such as architecture, traditional African music and prayer forms, the home and family in worship life, the community approach to worship, the Sacraments, the use of religious dancing in worship, clapping of hands, confession of sin, exorcism of troublesome spirits, the role of visions and dreams, symbols, etc.

2. *The Community:* African traditional life is largely built on the

community. Since the Church is also a community of those who have Faith in Jesus Christ, this overlapping concept can be exploited much more on the African scene, particularly in terms of the family, the relatives, the neighbours, the departed, the question of mutual interdependence and the sustaining of one another in times of need. It is not enough to reach only the individual with the Gospel. In African traditional world view, the well-being of man is intimately connected with the well-being of the total creation. Similarly, the Gospel has both community and cosmic implications. We cannot, therefore, afford to speak of the salvation of man in isolation from the rest of creation. We read in Romans 8:19, 21f. "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God . . . because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God . . ." The final vision of the new creation in Christ, being taken from the Old Testament, is one in which there will be "new heavens and a new earth."

3. Church nurture and education: In the African setting, the home has always been the centre of nurture and education for the children. It must continue to be so for Christian families. Church buildings are not the most suitable places for communicating and experiencing the real essence of the Faith. Often these big and beautiful buildings are frightening: they are impersonal, they create a feeling of phobia, they silence people who often have problems but cannot open them up in a Church building; and worse still the buildings are often empty from Monday to Saturday. God is not on a regular weekly holiday from Monday to Saturday for Christians, or Sunday to Friday for Jews, and Saturday to Thursday for Muslims. The early Church emerged on the basis of the Christian home, since Christians did not have their own church buildings. I believe that there is much to be said about "home churches" in Africa.

One cannot overlook the value of schools, seminaries, theological faculties and departments of religion in our various universities. But a careful study of the curriculum of the seminaries and theological colleges, shows that this curriculum is very much out of touch with the realities of African culture and problems.

One is encouraged, however, by the genuine attempts being made in different parts of Africa, to make greater use of indigenous cultural materials and to relate the Faith to the problems of our time.

4. Christian values and ethics: The Christian faith mediates certain values which sustain the life of the individual, of the Community and of the Church, such as: love, truth, justice, the right of life, the 'right' use of sex, freedom, etc. Many of these values are in fact very similar to those that have developed through African traditional religiosity and insights. Attempts are being made to relate them to the living existential situations of African peoples within their cultural milieu.

5. Christian service and witness: Corporate life, community life and Church life, are not a life in isolation. The Christian Faith is public property which is being shared through service and proclaimed through evangelism. It

is at the very heart of what Jesus Himself did: He went about preaching the Gospel, healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the hungry . . . This is what Christianity is attempting to emulate in the African setting.

There are many people who are ready to listen to the Gospel — but they want to hear it in their own languages and life situations. There are many who are spiritually and morally dead, politically oppressed, economically exploited, socially ostracised. There are many who are hungry — physically starving, and thousands crying out for the food of love, justice and care. The Gospel and the Church must feed them first. Unless they have enough to eat and drink, they will be too concerned about their stomachs to hear the Gospel; unless they are socially and economically given to eat (set free), they will not understand what the Gospel is all about. The centre of a hungry man is not his heart but his stomach. The centre of an oppressed man is not his head but the chains that bind his legs and hands. The centre of the destitute, is not his soul but his basic rights and his craving for love. We have a saying that: “You should not abandon a child when she has an itching sore”. In many ways the Church is attempting to reach the destitute, the poorest of the poor, the ugly, the unwanted. This is certainly an expression of God’s love towards people where they are and as they may be.

Evangelism in Africa is making enormous strides. There is a vast host of evangelists — men and women, young and old, everywhere, at least in the southern two thirds of the continent. As a result of this evangelistic work, each year the Church is increasing by 5% — partly through new conversions, and partly through demographic increase among the Christians. But evangelism has two dimensions: the human effort, and the divine superintendence. On the human level, evangelism is being related to the culture of the people concerned: using all its tools for the glory of God — tools of language, art, drama, dance, music, symbols, world views, technology, mass media, the Bible in different languages, and tools of customs that have produced special meaning for life (e.g. in connection with birth, adolescence, marriage, death; festivals and rituals that do not contradict the Gospel message, etc.).

Nevertheless, we must point out that Church life in Africa has often been afraid of African cultural elements — such fears are not justifiable in most cases. People have been afraid that our cultures will make the Gospel rusty. But this is not the case, for God is the supreme protector of the Gospel, therefore nothing can alter it, nothing can change it, and nothing can make it unclean. And yet, it must be pointed out that within our culture, there are elements that may obscure the preaching or elucidation of the Gospel. African Christians should look out for such elements, in order to exorcise them, eliminate them, avoid them, and if possible destroy them by the power of the Gospel. But the Church should not pose as a spiritual police of people’s cultural life, since the Church itself is made up of sinful men, women and children, and its own history is not without fault.

6. *The Christian and his culture:* There are several ways by which the Christian relates to his culture. Some Christians withdraw, — or wish to —, from their culture, as if they could completely disown it. Others regard their culture negatively — as if culture is totally and irrevocably evil. Other

Christians depict an attitude of hostility towards culture, condemning it, despising it, fearing it, always regarding it as a temptation to sinfulness. There are those who embrace culture uncritically, as though culture were perfect and always right. Another view regards Christ as having come to "save" the whole person, including the person's culture and history and environment. Culture shapes man, and man creates culture. African Christians are also makers of culture. Many Christians are making cultural contributions to the life of the Church, e.g. musicians and singers, artists, authors, poets, story tellers, dancers, dramatists, newspaper, radio and television reporters, architects, technicians, craftsmen, doctors, teachers, weavers, makers of handicrafts, etc.

7. *The Bible and African Culture:* It is no mean achievement by missionaries and African converts that today we have the Bible translated in part or in full, into nearly 600 African languages. Through the translation of the Scriptures the basic elements of the Christian Faith come into intimate links with African culture. In the process of translation, the Biblical world is injected into African thought forms and concepts; and in return, African cultural elements enter the Biblical world. The process of translation is, in fact, reciprocal.

At another level the Bible is close to African peoples because of the many items in common, between their cultural life and the cultural life of the Jewish people as contained in the Bible. African readers feel much at home in parts of the Old Testament (like Genesis, Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Psalms, Proverbs) and the Synoptic Gospels.

Examples can be given to illustrate some of the important cultural elements and values in African life which find parallels or references in the Bible as well. Thus: respect (for the aged, for parents, for authority), justice, truth, friendship, hospitality, the value of children (and the more of them the better), marriage customs (such as the necessity to get married, marriage gifts, protection of women, divorce customs, plural wives especially for leaders like chiefs and kings, inheriting the wife of one's dead brother, etc.), family coherence, corporate or communal life, festivals of celebration and commemoration, the centrality of God in religious life, the use of artistic and creative talents, mystical ties to the land, etc. There are cultural elements which are 'hated' very much in African life and in a similar way in the Bible. For example: theft and stealing, sexual abuses (like incest, homosexual relations, rape and adultery), meanness, murder and homicide, telling lies, divorce, witchcraft and sorcery, the curse, disrespect, laziness, slander, plus many taboos.

There are historical and mythological parallels, ethical parallels, and parallels in world-views, etc. In more recent years African peoples have identified their political struggles with, and received inspiration from, the enslavement, deliverance and exodus account of the children of Israel in Egypt.

We see, therefore, that for African peoples, the Bible is not only the book of their Christian Faith, it also gives them a place in which they project their

cultural life, history and experience. 'Officially' the Church has used the Bible only as an evangelistic tool. But African readers get more out of the Bible than its evangelistic message.

It is also the Bible that gives us the basis for judging culture. It is necessary for the Church in Africa to sharpen its use of the Bible as a basis of judging or critically evaluating cultural elements and practices. Unless African culture understands the Biblical message, no other culture in the world will be able to mediate this message to the African peoples effectively.

8. Culture and the Gospel, as allies: Without culture, the Gospel cannot encounter people. Yet, by its very nature, even though expressed and communicated within the limits of culture, the Gospel is itself beyond culture. The beyondness of the Gospel derives from the fact that God is the author of the Gospel while man is the author of culture. Culture makes us very earthly and human, the Gospel makes us very heavenly and divine. It is not culture but the Gospel which has the final say over us as human beings. Yet, the Gospel makes us new people in Christ within the framework of our culture and not apart from it. For that reason, the Gospel and culture are not mutually contradictory or in conflict — since man (and not culture) is the sinner and the Gospel changes man whatever culture makes him to be.

III. CONCLUSION

1. African culture must bring glory to God. The Gospel is intended for the whole man in the whole world (oikumene) and creation (Mt. 28:19f., Mk. 16:15, Eph. 1:9f., II Cor. 5:17, Col. 1:15-20, etc.). Therefore the Church must take African culture seriously. In the book of Revelations, the final picture of the new creation is one in which, among other things, the people of the whole world, bring into the holy city, the new Jerusalem, "the glory and the honour of the nations" (Rev. 21). I believe that Africa is spiritually capable of bringing its contribution of glory, to the city of God, through the elements of our religiosity and culture — healed, saved, purified and sanctified by the Gospel.

2. The Gospel must judge African culture. While advocating this positive use of our culture in Church life, we must also, without fear or hesitation, bring the Gospel to bear upon our culture in order to evaluate it, to judge it, to transform it. Because culture is created by man, and because man is sinful, what he creates, however beautiful, however great, however highly cultivated it might be, nevertheless bears the imprint of human sinfulness — through individual sins, corporate sins, structural sins, economic sins, social sins, political sins, national sins and international sins. Culture does not cleanse itself of its own impurities; it does not rescue itself from decay and deformities. Culture has its demons, which only the Gospel is equipped to exorcise and disarm. So now, it is the duty of the Church, particularly through its leaders and theologians, to guide our people in getting our culture evaluated, judged and rescued from its demonic powers and sinfulness. The task has hardly begun, and its agenda is long.

3. Christian First, then African (Maori, Australian, etc.) African Christians are seeking to respond simultaneously to the demands of the Gospel and the demands of their culture. Sometimes these demands overlap and complement each other; sometimes they are neutral to each other; and sometimes they are mutually opposed or contradictory.

In its own way, culture can be "all powerful" over the individual and his community, at least in a temporary way. It says to each one of us: "You are mine, you belong to me. I have made you truly an Indian, an African or an Australian. You owe me allegiance." The Gospel is also "all powerful", at least ultimately. It says to the Christian: "While I may respect your cultural identity, you are nevertheless, profoundly mine. I have saved you. You belong to me, and I wish to own you entirely. I am making you a new creation."

For many Christians in the world it is easy to say that they are first and foremost "African", "European", "Japanese", or whatever else their culture and society have made them. But the New Testament order is: First Christian, and then African, beggar or king, male or female. Indeed, these other identities and points of distinction fade away as the identity with Christ becomes more and more central. We have no choice other than to be first Christian, and then whatever else our culture and society make us, cost what it may. The trouble comes when we reverse this Gospel order of priorities.

However great and sublime our various cultures might be, they have their limitations. Culture cannot take us to the promised land of Faith in Christ. There are other values and heights beyond those of culture. Culture may boast of a golden period, but culture has neither eschatology nor eschaton to which it may take its sons and daughters. But the Gospel has a clear eschatology and eschaton. Therefore the Christian is a cultural pilgrim and not a permanent settler, moving with his cultural baggage towards that eschatological goal of the Gospel. At best culture brings us to the Gospel; then the Gospel takes over and carries us to the eschaton promised to all mankind and all creation in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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