

African Christianity: A Living and Vibrant Repository of Christian Faith - Part II

Cristianismo africano: um repositório vivo e vibrante da fé crista - Parte II

Johny Thachuparamban
The Jesuit Institut South Africa, Africa do Sul

Abstract

Africa has played a remarkable role in the formation and growth of Christian faith and culture, right from its infancy. The ancient nature of African Christianity has been substantiated in the first part of this article which tries to establish African Christianity as one of the pillars of faith in Christendom; a fact corroborated by its unique indigenous spiritual symbols, its traditional proverbs that resonate with Christian wisdom literature, and above all its liturgical innovations and vibrancy both in ancient times and post Vatican Council II. Hence the themes discussed are: African Jesus as an ‘Ancestor par excellence’; African liturgical heritage; the Church as Family of God; African proverbs, and African contribution to world Christianity. All this lends a particular stamp of identity and character to African Christianity, not as a replica of Western or Eastern Christianity, but as a unique and equal tradition, a contemporary repository of Christianity.

Resumo

A África desempenhou um papel notável na formação e no crescimento da fé e da cultura cristãs desde sua infância. A natureza antiga do cristianismo africano, substanciada na primeira parte deste artigo, tenta estabelecer o cristianismo africano como um dos pilares da fé na cristandade. Tal fato é corroborado por seus singulares símbolos espirituais indígenas, por seus provérbios tradicionais, nos quais ressoa a literatura de sabedoria cristã e, acima de tudo, por suas inovações litúrgicas e por sua vibração tanto nos tempos antigos quanto no Concílio Vaticano II. Por isso, os temas discutidos são: Jesus africano como “antepassado por excelência”; herança litúrgica africana; Igreja como família de Deus; provérbios africanos e a contribuição africana para o cristianismo mundial. Tudo isso empresta uma marca particular de identidade e caráter ao cristianismo africano, não como uma réplica do cristianismo ocidental ou oriental, mas como uma tradição única e igualitária, um repositório contemporâneo do cristianismo.

Keywords

African Jesus.
African
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Contextual
Theologies.
Dancing
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as Proto-
Ancestor.
Small
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Communities.
Ujamaa and
Ubuntu.
Zairian Rite.

Palavras-chave

Jesus africano.
Cosmovisão
Africana.
Teologias
contextuais.
Igreja
dançante.
Jesus como
Proto-
Ancestral.
Pequenas
comunidades
cristãs.
Ujamaa e
Ubuntu.
Rito Zairiano.

Introduction

As seen in Part One, North Africa was a major centre of Christian thought and activity during the first centuries after Christ. Sadly, Christianity in much of North Africa virtually disappeared as Islam advanced in the following centuries. Later, during the colonization and modern periods Christianity spread in major parts of the continent of Africa. Most often in the past, the African continent had been considered as an appendix to Europe both in politics and religion. Now, however, Africa has acquired its own continental identity from all perspectives: religious, cultural, social, and political.¹ In particular, the Christian religion in Africa has come of age, for it is now closely identified with African culture. Hence, the next focus is to explore the uniqueness of African Christianity today as the fourth and current phase of Christianity in the 21st century in Africa.

For this purpose, this study first focuses on reconstruction of the 'African Jesus' as an '*Ancestor par excellence*' in the African context. Then follow the discussions on the African liturgical heritage, the Church as the family of God, and African Proverb as the bedrock of Christianity. The final section, more in the vein of a personal reflection, focuses on the possibility of an African contribution to world Christianity. In effect, it can rightly be concluded that the present stage of Christianity in Africa (the fourth stage) makes it a living and vibrant repository of Christian faith.

African Jesus, an Ancestor Par Excellence

It is commendable when Christianity incarnates in the soil of the land clothed in the cultural garment that appeals to the people of the place. This will lead the people to know and love Jesus from an indigenous perspective.

¹ For example, the formation of the *African Union* is primarily an expression of African identity. *Fronteiras, Recife*, v. 2, n. 1, p. 118-139, jan./jun., 2019

In traditional African society ancestral veneration is one of the fundamental pillars of religion for many ethnic groups in the country. It is an attempt to preserve good relations with the departed kin. On this issue, the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus* affirms: “In the African worldview, life is perceived as something that embraces and includes ancestors, the living and those yet to be born, the whole of creation and all beings.”² Scholars in Africa attempt to stress the importance of intermediaries in the African way of life and spirituality. The notion of communion with the dead is central to the worldview of African peoples as is evident in the funeral rites, the rites of initiation, and in hunting ceremonies and other rituals which include intercessions to the ancestors. Although ancestral veneration takes different forms in different African societies, the cult of the dead is an integral part of African culture. According to John Mbiti:

The idea of intermediaries fits well with the African view of the universe, which holds that the invincible world is in some ways higher than that of man, but God is higher still. In order to reach God effectively it may be useful to approach him by first approaching those who are lower than he is but higher than the ordinary person.³

To understand Jesus from the African perspective the African Christian theologians have developed a variety of metaphors, images, and names for Jesus Christ. They have indicated how Jesus takes on various identities such as Brother, Elder, Healer, Liberator, Chief, Priest, and Ancestor. In fact, by these images, people in Africa are able to relate to Jesus Christ in a palpable way, the African way.⁴ Hence, Jesus as a mediator ancestor becomes easily conceivable to many African communities who still believe their ancestors’ spirit influences their lives. Benezet Bujo of Congo perceived Christ as the ‘proto-ancestor,’ the ‘unique ancestor’ and an ‘ancestor par excellence.’ He incorporates this view with the theology of incarnation. He says:

² Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, (Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 2011), # 69.

³ J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, (London: Heinemann, 1975), 63-64.

⁴ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, (Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 1995), # 127, emphasizes “bringing Christ into the very center of African life and of lifting up all African life to Christ. Thus not only is Christianity relevant to Africa, but Christ, in the members of his Body, is himself African.”

By becoming 'part of the earth,' Christ has made his own the whole history and legitimate aspirations of our ancestors. These ancestors become the locus (the human nature) where we encounter the God of salvation; and the Church becomes the unique and privileged locus of total encounter with those ancestors.⁵

Jesus as Proto-Ancestor also means that Jesus is the source of all life. The central role of the ancestor is that he is the protector of life. Africans find in Christ a manifestation of those qualities which they attribute to their ancestors. As Jesus nourishes the life of believers (Jn 6: 51), the ancestors watch over the lives of their descendants, and continuously strengthen them. Just as ancestors watch over their descendants, Jesus as Perfect Ancestor is ever present with human beings (Mt 28: 20).

Donald Goergen admits difficulty in understanding this concept in a literal sense. He argues,

Ancestors are often not women, but this depends upon the particular ethnic community and its ancestor traditions. Among the strengths of the image is that Christ as a common ancestor can help us to overcome a destructive ethnocentrism. We are one family in Christ, one tribe, one community.⁶

Clearly this concept is to be understood more in a theological rather than a literal sense, for, all those who believe in his name and do the will of the Father are not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of human will, but of God (Jn 1:13; Mt 12:48ff).⁷ The Christian dogma of the communion of saints is one way to engage in a possible dialogue with the African ancestral cult. Theologians who have attempted this dialogue often draw parallels between the Christians' world of spiritual realities and that of the African world. The

⁵ Cf. B. Bujo, "A Christocentric Ethic for Black Africa," *Theology Digest*, 30 (1982) 143-146, 143.

⁶ D. J. Goergen, "The Quest for the Christ of Africa," *African Christian Studies*, 17 (2001) 5-41, 8. He adds that the title Jesus as Proto-Ancestor is more than the authentic God-fearing African ancestor and one who transcends that ideal into a new completion.

⁷ Cf. B. Bujo and J. I. Muya, ed., *African Theology: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2003), 134.

Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in his opening homily at the 1984 Synod of Africa alluded to this. He said:

The Church of Rome salutes these peoples, especially their religious traditions, in which is expressed the ardent quest for the one God through veneration of their ancestors. These traditions are still a heritage of the majority of the inhabitants of Africa. They are traditions which are open to the gospel, open to the truth... They believe instinctively that the dead continue to live and remain in communion with them. Is this not in some way a preparation for the belief in the communion of saints?⁸

In fact, the veneration of ancestors is more than a preparation for the belief in the communion of saints; for the ancestors may not be Christians, but because they love their living members, they enter into a relationship with the friends (communion of saints) of their family members (the living Christians). In this sense, African culture makes Christianity more personal. Veneration of the ancestors from the personal model could be seen as the African contribution to the ongoing moulding of Christian life. As Donald Goergen observes, the strength of the concept of ancestor Christology lies in the fact that it is thoroughly African, and at the same time Christian. He affirms: “Jesus, our Ancestor acculturates Jesus within African cultures. It inserts Jesus into African soil. It incarnates Jesus as God’s word in an African context. It is an African Jesus. Jesus is our ancestor, an ancestor of all Africans, the proto-ancestor of us all, the new Adam, our ancestor origin.”⁹ This not only personalizes the African Jesus but also universalizes him.

J. Mutiso-Mubinda argues that just like the African ancestors and the Christians saints, Jesus’ African identification as an ‘Ancestor par excellence’ is intimately related to the Father. This is so well adopted across the culture that just as the universal church views saints as sanctified persons who enjoy a certain privilege and contact with the Father, who therefore can act as

⁸ John Paul II, Homily at Opening Mass, in *L’ Osservatore Romano*, 15, 1336 (April 13, 1994) 1. Cf. J. Healey and D. Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 215.

⁹ Goergen, “The Quest for the Christ of Africa,” 8.

channels of mediation, the majority of Africans look on Jesus, as an ‘Ancestor’ par excellence, hence a mediator between them and the Father.¹⁰ This new understanding may offer the best theological meeting point for Christianity and African indigenous religions. Whilst the topic of African Ancestors draws various reactions from Christians in the rest of the world, it is a fact that African Christianity is incomplete without it. Hence there is an urgent need for genuine dialogue between the African Christian scholars and the rest of the Christian world to see how the concept of African ancestors can enrich Christianity. However, it can be affirmed that Jesus Christ as an Ancestor par excellence is a unique concept that helps the people of Africa to create a picture of Jesus as one endowed with an African culture and identity.¹¹ Thus faith in Jesus for African Christians is strengthened through their encounter with Jesus as the Ancestor par excellence.

African Liturgical Heritage

Africa, in both its primitive and contemporary ages of Christianity has expressed in its liturgical celebration a particular Christian identity influenced by its rich cultural and religious traditions especially in Egypt and Ethiopia, both ancient and also in contemporary liturgical traditions in Zaire.

Ancient Liturgical Tradition

The Alexandrian Church

It is believed that the church of Alexandria in Egypt was one of the original centers of Christianity as it was the central focus of apostolic evangelization. This church claims its origin and tradition from St Mark, the Evangelist. It chiefly follows the Alexandrian Rite with its own anaphoras. In

¹⁰ Cf. J. Mutiso, *Anthropology and the Pascal Mystery in Spearhead*, (Eldoret: Gaba Publications, 1979), 52.

¹¹ See footnote 5.

this Rite, the primary and most significant liturgy used is the one associated with St Basil who lived in Egypt in the mid 4th century. Written in Greek, it was later translated verbatim into Coptic by St Cyril of Alexandria in the early 5th century. So while the Churches of the Alexandrian Rite refer to this Greek version as the Liturgy of St Cyril, it still retains its official title as ‘the Anaphora of our Holy Father Mark the Apostle.’ The Alexandrian Rite, designed within the African culture and religious tradition Christianized by the immediate Apostles of Jesus has produced a trio of remarkable Churches for Catholics throughout the world to treasure, namely: the Coptic Egyptian Catholic Church, the Ethiopian Catholic Church, and the Eritrean Catholic Church.

The Ethiopian Church

Although the Ethiopian eunuch had implanted the seed of Christianity in this land in the first half of the first century, Christianity did not become a state religion in Ethiopia until the 4th century (circa 330) when Kings Abreha and Aşebha were converted to Christianity.¹² Its proper order of liturgical celebration had its foundation at the Episcopal consecration of Frumentius by St Athanasius of Alexandria.¹³ The Ethiopian rite is usually known for its own distinctive Eucharistic liturgy (*Qeddase*) which is neither a replica of the Coptic liturgy of Alexandria nor of the Roman Rite.¹⁴ Dalmais notes that in terms of tradition and literature, the Ethiopian Church has firmly established a lively form of piety nourished on Judaic and apocalyptic legends making its liturgy unique.¹⁵ The rich and dynamic Ethiopian *Qeddase* integrates Jewish, Coptic and Syrian traditions. Dalmais further concedes, “there are also native Ethiopian compositions (of anaphoras), especially in the hymnary, and a

¹² Cf. A. B. Mercer, *The Ethiopic Liturgy: Its Sources Development and Present Form*, (London: The Young Churchman Co., 1916), 84.

¹³ *Eccelesia in Africa*, # 31 says that St Frumentius, who is known as the first apostle of Ethiopia, was consecrated as bishop by Athanasius. It is also believed that he was instrumental in the introduction of liturgical formularies and sacramental rites in Ethiopia.

¹⁴ Cf. C. Sumner, “The Ethiopic Liturgy: An Analysis,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 1 (1963) 40-46, 40.

¹⁵ H. Dalmais, *Eastern Liturgies*, (New York: Hawthorn Books Publishers, 1960), 25.

remarkable adaptation to local taste and customs of rites borrowed from places widely separated in the Christian world.”¹⁶

By using various symbols, the Ethiopian liturgy manifests a sense of joy and unity as well as a sacrificial and contemplative character.¹⁷ This liturgy includes also the procession of the elegantly attired priests, preceded by deacons carrying beautiful Ethiopian processional crosses; loud and spirited acclamations and chants of the attending faithful, frequently sung in variable melodies all signifying the heavenly beauty of the *Qeddase*. Chant and antiphony to the accompaniment of lyres, drums, sistrums, trumpets and dances are a significant part of this liturgy (Cf. I Samuel 6:5). The outdoor liturgical services in the Ethiopian tradition clearly reflect the cosmological dimension, and its uniqueness lies predominately in its firm basis on the culture of the country. Thus it can be affirmed that the Ethiopian liturgy has contributed to the evolution of the indigenous people’s culture. Furthermore, these regions of Ethiopia have produced many great saints, even though their numbers are now small due to the church’s historical schisms and militant Islamist groups. It is obvious that the vibrancy of these Christians continuously shines forth, and becomes a true “light to the African land from where they draw their rich religious tradition and heritage for all to see.”¹⁸

Contemporary Liturgical Rite (the Zairian Rite)

In the contemporary world, liturgical inculturation is undoubtedly a complex and delicate process, yet an inherent characteristic of authentic evangelization. Characterized by inculturation, the African church post Vatican II has been an enduring force in the church’s new mission. The official recognition of the Zaire Rite of Africa universally confirms this view. The Zairian

¹⁶ Dalmais, *Eastern Liturgies*, 56.

¹⁷ Summer, “*Ethiopian Liturgy*,” 41-45, explains the specific features of Ethiopian liturgy: its contemplative character, symbolism, the note of joy, sense of community, concern for unity, sacrificial aspect, role of the Holy Spirit, and mediation of Mary.

¹⁸ C. Battell, *The Ethiopians, Light from the East: A Symposium on the Oriental Orthodox and Assyrian Churches*, ed. Henry Hill, (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1988), 87.

rite is enriched by the African Ancestral worship and by its own spiritual tradition. Even before the Second Vatican Council it had been advocating and working towards the development of both African Philosophy and African Theology.

However, the Project of the Zairian Rite began in 1969, and was presented to the Holy See on 4th December 1973 as 'The Zairian Rite of Eucharistic Celebration.' It was approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship on April 30, 1988 as the 'Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire.' Its wide acceptance is seen in its use at the opening of the African Synod in Rome in April, 1994. The Zairian liturgy is in effect an attempt to inculturate the Roman Missal in an African context, inspired by the liturgical reform initiated by the Second Vatican Council. In that sense, this rite is considered as a paradigm for inculturation in Africa. The Church in Zaire has been in the forefront in making the Christian faith at home in Africa.

Some of the elements of inculturation in the Zairian liturgy which differ from the Roman Liturgy are the following: the priest is dressed in the robes of a tribal priest; the servers (all male) carry spears; an announcer (as one finds in African public functions) is introduced; the celebrants and the servers dance around the altar as a sign of veneration, then there is the invocation of saints and ancestors. After the invocation of the Saints and Ancestors of Zaire along with the canonized Saints of the Church, the celebrant gives a brief introduction to the readings of the day, bows to the altar and greets the people. He then invites the faithful to unite themselves to the entire communion of saints.

Some other unique features of this rite include: the sprinkling of holy water after the kiss of peace; pots of incense and its use during the general intercessions; and dancing while offering gifts for those in need. In addition there are new prayers that highlight key elements of African worldview; the lifting of hands along with prayers and responses; people sitting while the Gospel is read; and a special invocation for Africa included in the Eucharistic prayer. While in the Latin rite the communicants respond with 'Amen' here

they respond with ‘I believe.’ The dismissal is characterized by a joyful procession and dancing while leaving the centre of worship.¹⁹

Unlike the Roman liturgy, which is more ritualistic, the Zairian liturgy is more communitarian in the sense that everybody is needed, relevant and important. The creativity and cultural adaptation in the rite of consecration, music, and liturgical vestments are a great contribution to African Christian worship. This form of worship integrated in the liturgical tradition definitely helps the African church to understand the person and mystery of Jesus from an African perspective.

The African Church as Family of God

The African Synod of 1994 proposed the image of Church as “God’s Family” as an appropriate image for the African church. In traditional Africa, to be human is to be part of the whole community. Unlike western society that is basically individualistic, African society is essentially communitarian.²⁰ As God’s family (Trinity) is basically communitarian, so the Church’s role is participation in the Trinitarian life and building of community in society. In today’s context of African Christianity, this model is one of the most striking and challenging images for all communities in the world. Family values in African society are quite similar to the Church’s values; and so the image of the Church as family of God fits well and communicates effectively to the African people.²¹

In African tradition there are two African terms used to explain the communitarian nature of Church. The first is *Ujamaa*, (Kiswahili) meaning ‘togetherness, familyhood and brotherhood.’ It focuses on communion and community relationship. The other word is *Ubuntu* from the ‘Nguni’ community

¹⁹ For more details on Zairian Liturgy, see the format of “The Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire.”

²⁰ *Ecclesia in Africa* (# 43) says: “African cultures have an acute sense of solidarity and community life. In Africa it is unthinkable to celebrate a feast without the participation of the whole village.”

²¹ Cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, # 81.

in South Africa meaning ‘humanity towards others.’ African philosophy has adapted it: a ‘belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity.’ It implies ‘fraternity and forgiveness.’ Hence, both these terms are used for Christian community building today. Thus the values of hospitality, communality, care for others, unity, and solidarity that are found in African traditional societies can well reflect the essence of the Church, as well as address the actual challenges of African society such as tribalism, ethnocentrism, wars, corruption, and hunger.²² By the use of *ujamaa* and *ubuntu* as theological tools for the church in Africa, it is possible to understand the deep meaning of Church in African tradition as family of God. The hierarchical images of the western church have little relevance to the African church as they are familiar with only the communitarian aspect of the Church.

The African Christians are looking for a church of dialogue and participation where they can feel they are true participants and true partners in the life and mission of the church. They need a church that integrates their cultural values and gives them a sense of belonging. In the words of Pope John Paul II, “The synthesis between culture and faith is not only a demand of culture but also of faith, because a faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived.”²³ In this perspective, the family church model in Africa if well inculturated would give meaning to the essential tenets of Christianity grounded on fraternal love and compassion.²⁴

In today’s individualist, materialistic, and consumerist world the understanding of the Church as family becomes very relevant for we find rampant in Africa ethnic tensions, tribalism, and polygamy.²⁵ Oliver Alozie Onwubiko also informs us of the importance of this image:

²² Cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, # 92.

²³ *Ecclesia in Africa*, # 78.

²⁴ Cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, # 63

²⁵ Although the church as family model is very relevant to the African context, the current churches in Africa face some serious issues. First and foremost, the values of the traditional family (for example, relationality, hospitality, solidarity, mutual respect) are slowly disappearing from the families due to the present socio-cultural and economic system which fosters negative ethnicity, domestic violence, single parenthood, divorce, polygamy, abortion

In the typical African family there are found all sorts of individuals, just as the church is made up of saints and sinners. In a typical African compound family, one finds peace-makers and troublemakers, builders and destroyers, dancers and drummers, strong and weak people, in short, in the African imagery, in a great family there is no type of music that one beats and you would not find someone in it who can dance to its tune. Yet it remains, continues, and functions as one family.²⁶

At present the church fosters units called small Christian communities as a way of being church-as-family. This would replicate Africa in the pre-Christian age when it was divided into clans or *Jamii* (family). In such small family units the faithful come together, share their lives together, read the Gospel together, and ask themselves: “What is Jesus Christ telling us today?” In this way they integrate the Gospel values in their lives, deepening and enhancing their faith. Within such small families that reflect the now declining African clan system, the members feel a sense of belonging and become more active, developing new ministries that enable them to evangelize among themselves.²⁷

For the realization of the family model church in Africa, the fact of authentic inculturation must overwhelmingly suffice. It must be accepted that God indeed used pre-Christian ideas, cultures, and individuals such as Abraham and other ancestors in preparation for the Child Jesus; and Africa with its rich primitive cultures and way of life is equally part of this preparation. This was part of the history of Christianity in Europe as well as Africa, particularly North Africa and Ethiopia. The continent of Africa with its long heritage is in the best position to lead the church in fostering such a fraternal and communal society where the church is perceived as a family in dialogue with everyone, and where

and prostitution. Secondly, the church model is vehemently against the gender discrimination prevalent in African patrilineal societies.

²⁶ O. A. Onwubiko, *The Church in Mission: In the Light of Ecclesia in Africa*, (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2001), 93.

²⁷ According to Stan Chu Ilo, the African church is modelled as the agent of new way of living and working together in families, communities, and political institutions. For further discussion on the theme of the culture of communion and solidarity in African Church, see, S. C. Ilo, *The Church and Development in Africa: Aid and Development from the Perspective of Catholic Social Ethics*, (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 264-265.

every member is respected and loved. So the African church as God's Family is characterized by Christian unity and growth illustrated in the African terms *Ubuntu* and *Ujamaa*. These words serve to express the Christian faith and contribute to developing a community-oriented ecclesiology in Africa.

African Proverbs, the Bedrock of Christianity

African Christian inculturation would be incomplete without taking into consideration the oral literature of the African people, including their rich storehouse of proverbs that facilitates interaction between African culture and the Christian faith leading to reformulation of Christianity in terms of African culture. In this regard, Pope Paul VI's advice is noteworthy: "Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life."²⁸ It means that Africans should experience Jesus as incarnated in African culture, explained in their own language and vocabulary.

The traditional African wisdom of proverbs seeks to use universal experience for new applications in the modern world. Oral traditions in Africa for instance, folktales, proverbs, riddles, and narratives are generally used as tools for advice, reproach, warning and encouragement for a good life; and thus, they serve social and ethical purposes. Proverbs in particular are used as windows to the African world-view. Moreover, they function as reflections of the society as they describe its values, aspirations and way of life.

Hence, it would be fruitful to compare African sayings with scriptural wisdom sayings which bear a striking similarity. For example, a Sukuma (Tanzanian) proverb goes like this: 'What goes into the stomach is not lasting;' and in Mk 7: 18-19 Jesus says: "Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart but the stomach and

²⁸ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Apostolic Exhortation*, # 63.

goes out into the sewer?”²⁹ In fact these parallelisms help the people of Africa to discover applied Christian meaning and basic values. Nyakundi Evans selected eighty Gusii proverbs (from Kenya) for which he could find biblical parallels.³⁰ African proverbs as demonstrated here reveal how God already planted the seeds of Christian faith in African culture even before His incarnation. The Second Vatican Council (*Ad Gentes*, # 11) conveys the desire of the church to engage in dialogue with African proverbs, to see how such rich wisdom can enhance the universal faith of the church.

Just like Proverbs in the Old Testament which are known for their emphasis on moral teachings, interpersonal relationships, as well as the meaning of life, the proverbs in African tradition are a medium of instilling moral values, instructing familial and communal virtues for living wisely in society. For example, African ethics is expressed in various African proverbs which recognize the individual only in relation to other members of the community.³¹ This is elucidated in proverbs from various parts of African society, for example ‘Unity is strength, division is weakness’ (Swahili), ‘Two ants do not fail to pull one grasshopper’ (Tanzania), ‘If you want to go quickly go alone, but if you want to go far go together’ (Kenya). They all emphasize that whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole community, and vice versa.³² Similarly, communal virtues are inherent in the scriptural Proverbs 1-9 in particular. The virtues underlined here seek to promote values that are fundamental in community well-being and prosperity.

African proverbs also highlight the importance of unity and cordiality within the family. For example: ‘A family is like a forest; when you are outside it is dense, when you are inside you see that each tree has its place’ (Ethiopia); and ‘A united family eats from the same plate,’ (Baganda). These proverbs

²⁹ Cf. Healey, and Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 45- 46. For further details on African proverbs, see W. Saayman, ed., *Embracing the Baobab Tree: The African Proverb in the 21st Century*, (Pretoria: Unisa Press), 1997.

³⁰For detailed information, see E.K. Nyakundi, *The Gusii Proverbs*, (Nairobi: Published by the author, 2001), 30.

³¹ Cf. M. F. Murove, “Beyond the Savage Evidence Ethic: A Vindication of African Ethics,” in *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, M. F. Murove ed., (Scottsville: KwaZulu Natal Press, 2011), 301.

³² A fundamental African Proverb says: ‘I am because we are; we are because I am.’

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complement each other, and emphasize the value of amicable family relations. Similarly, many proverbs found in the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament also emphasize family relationship and family prosperity (for example, Prov 1:8; 2: 1; 3:1; 4:10). The other themes which are common in both sets of proverbs are the following: a sense of the sacredness of life, religion and all things, regard for hospitality, respect for authority, and for elders who are endowed with wisdom and experience.

The African church endowed with a rich oral narrative and a long history of Christianity must make appropriate use of its fascinating proverbs in its Christian faith life experience. Like the Greek philosophy that was considered on par with the mosaic Laws of the Hebrews, and the Indian sacred writings of the Vedas and Upanishad, the African proverbs can also equally be seen as the bedrock of Christian faith. These precious gifts of God to the people are His own initial revelation. Needless to say, that a serious dialogue between Christian faith and African culture will certainly be enriched by the interaction between African proverbs and those of the Scriptures. These similarities may enable African biblical scholars to use the Old Testament to understand African culture, and African culture to understand the Old Testament. Moreover, the complementarity of these sets of wisdom shows that Christianity is at home amongst the African people as proverbs is an integral part of the African way of life.

African Christianity: A Potential Contributor to Global Christianity

At the close of the twentieth century, it was clear that Christianity had not only become the most global of all religions, but also that Christianity was shifting its hub from the West to Latin America, Asia and above all to Africa. Christianity has undoubtedly grown in numbers in Africa where it has become more vibrant and energetic than any other part of the world. Of the 59 countries and territories in Africa, more than 31 countries have Christianity as the

dominant religion.³³ The Church in Africa is aware of its mission of transforming humanity by being the yeast, the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. Over the last 50 years Africa has seen a tremendous growth of Christianity from mission-centred churches to missionary churches with contextualized theologies.³⁴

The Christianity typical of the twenty-first century and of the future could be shaped by the events and processes that take place in Africa. This paradigm shift in the Christian centre of gravity, therefore, demands that African Christian experience that has the prospect of shaping the Christian faith of the world must contribute something unique to the universal Christian theology. As Bauer rightly observes, “There is a growing recognition that the African church has an increasing global voice and that there are distinctive cultural, religious, and human values that Africa can offer to the world.”³⁵ It is therefore important to point out some specific African Christian religious practices that may serve as a point of departure for dialogue with world Christian faith.

To begin with, the concept of human beings in the African Christian tradition which impacts Christian life offers to the universal Christian faith some innovative ways of viewing humanity. The African view of being a human is to share a sense of community. Whereas in the western perspective humanity exists because of its thinking capacity (*Cogito ergo sum*), in Africa human existence is defined with reference to its being a member of community (*Sumus ergo Sum*); and this is illustrated by an African proverb: ‘A person is a person through other people.’³⁶ Unlike Europeans who are more time conscious, the Africans are more event oriented, as is evinced by the long Sunday Mass where everyone is involved in singing, dancing and praying. It is this communitarian participation that brings joy, enthusiasm and contentment. In the Africa

³³ Cf. Daugherty, “Assessing Christianity,” 349. He predicts that by 2030 there will be more Christians in Africa than in Latin America.

³⁴ Two post-synodal Apostolic Exhortations, *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995) and *Africa Munus* (2011), are indeed two major contributions of the African Synod to African Christianity.

³⁵ Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), 428.

³⁶ Cf. Footnote, 33.

tradition life is conceived as communion, a communion with all realities including ancestors.³⁷

The significance of dance in African tradition is highlighted in an African proverb: 'We dance, therefore we are.' In African wisdom when a man is tired of dancing, he is tired of life. So evidently dancing is an integral part of African existence. Hence the African Church is often called a 'dancing church,' as dancing makes liturgy more vibrant and active. In the future, the world Christian faith may develop a dance theology moulded on the African Christian theology that will someday place the African sacred dance in its right liturgical meaning and context and offer it on the altar of World Christianity.

Another crucial element in the African way of life is the use of proverbs and sayings as a medium of instilling moral values in African communities, and thereby developing a communal ethics, just like the instructions and maxims in the book of Proverbs, particularly those in chapters 1-9 which help to construct ethical norms and values in the community. The communitarian values contained in the African proverbs could contribute positively to the on-going discourse on wisdom ethics. The insight from such ethics can also influence dialogue on religious ethics in believing communities in Africa, and contribute enormously to world Christianity.

According to the African tradition the final aim and aspiration of every person is to reach the spirit world of one's ancestors. Therefore, ancestors who are in the spiritual realm are venerated for their exemplary lives. They are not worshipped, but highly respected. They are believed to act as intermediaries between God and their family members. Although, the topic of African Ancestors draws various reactions among scholars, African Christianity is incomplete without it, being an integral part of African tradition and belief. So it is important to consider how this belief can affect the universal Christian religion. Compared to western societies, the elderly people are shown greater respect in the African culture. They are not separated from their families or institutionalized in Africa, but are highly venerated and integrated within the

³⁷ *Africae Munus*, # 69.

families. This custom of revering old people in African culture, as Pope Benedict XVI observes, should inspire the Western societies and the entire world to treat the elderly with greater dignity.³⁸

The Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* acknowledged the concept of ‘the Church as God’s Family,’ which the Synod Fathers valued as an expression of the Church’s nature particularly appropriate for Africa. In fact, this image emphasizes the communitarian values in the society. The Exhortation further invited Christian families in Africa to become ‘domestic churches’ so as to help their respective communities to recognize that they belong to one single body. This image is important not only for the Church in Africa, but could also be a source of inspiration for the universal Church at a time when the family is under threat from those who seek to banish God from society. Furthermore, *Ecclesia in Africa* states: “Africans have a profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, of the existence of God the Creator and of a spiritual world.”³⁹ Besides, the flourishing Small Christian Communities in Africa are a significant new way of being church today and serving as a vehicle of parish and spiritual renewal in Africa that the universal church can learn from.

Christianity in Africa could be considered so old as to be termed an indigenous, traditional and African religion. The beliefs and practices of the traditional religions in Africa can enrich Christian theology and spirituality. However, care must be taken to avoid thinking that African Christianity is the same as African indigenous religion and culture. African Christians must sieve through, and adopt only what is good, in order to contribute towards enriching the universal Christian faith whose future lies largely in Africa.⁴⁰

With these resources Christianity in Africa is now more vibrant and energetic than in the rest of the world; and so it can offer the hope of invigorating world Christianity which unfortunately is in its decline in Europe and other parts of the world due to secularism, evident from the fact that many

³⁸ *Africae Munus*, # 47.

³⁹ *Ecclesia in Africa*, # 42.

⁴⁰ Cf. S. Kim and K. Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion*, (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 63.

religious congregations and societies in the West are facing a dearth of vocations and looking towards Africa for survival. Besides this, many African migrants who move to Europe and other parts of the world for different reasons carry their faith along with them in Diaspora. This is affirmed by *Africae Munus*: “The pilgrim church in Africa is also called to contribute to the new evangelization in secularized countries which once provided numerous missionaries but are today sadly lacking in vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life.”⁴¹

In this new context, African Christians share their faith with their new neighbours because for them this is a call for evangelization. Migration provides them a platform to share with the West their faith characterized by passion, energy and spiritual fervour. Furthermore, in the context of globalization and its effect on migration, Christianity in Africa provides hope for the universal church. This is well acknowledged by John Bauer who states: “African Christians have made the Bible their own; and African Catholicism highly esteems the Sacraments. There is a well-founded hope that Africa will soon be not just a developing Third World continent but a third spiritual power between the Christian East and the West,” or as Blyden prophesied over 100 years ago, “the spiritual reservoir of the world.”⁴²

Conclusion

In the forgoing discussion we have seen the growth of Christianity in Africa, and its unique contribution to Christian tradition. Christian presence in Africa is traced back to the very time of the Apostles, and now it has grown to the extent of having its own continental identity and consciousness. Being very old it can aptly be termed as an indigenous, traditional and African religion. The African church offers a significant contribution to world Christianity. It is unique not only by its ancient living Christian tradition, but also by its unique indigenous signs and symbols, and above all by the inculturation in liturgy and

⁴¹ *Africae Munus*, # 167.

⁴² Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, 17.

its vibrancy both in ancient times and post Vatican II. In the future the African continent will be the most populated Christian continent in the world. The challenge for African Christians of today is to own the faith, defend it with their lives, champion it, and spread it as the early African Christians did. The African church has to enhance the life of the universal church with its interpretation of the Gospel enhanced by a vibrant liturgy; and in so doing African Christianity would continue playing a major role in the growth of world Christianity today.

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Johny Thachuparamban

Johny Thachuparamban is a member of the CMI religious congregation. He has a Masters degree in Science with maths as major (MSc) from Kerala, India, and a Licentiate (STL) and Doctorate (STD) in biblical studies from KU Leuven, Belgium. He has served in the Kenya mission, at first, as Associate Pastor at Mbiuni Catholic Mission, Machakos, Kenya, and after his theological studies in Belgium as Professor at Hekima Jesuit University College, and later also as part time lecturer at Tangaza University College, Nairobi, Kenya. Besides this, he serves as visiting Professor of New Testament at St Charles Luwanga Diocesan Seminary, Windhoek, Namibia. His doctoral thesis on Matthean studies was published with the title *Jesus and the Law in the Matthean Community: A Source - and Redaction - Critical Study of Mt 5, 38-48*, Delhi, 2011. He has published articles in reputed journals. At present he is the Regional Superior of the CMI St Thomas Region, East Africa. Email: jthachu@gmail.com