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Christianity and African Culture

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I. INTRODUCTION

(a) Importance of this topic

AN AFRICAN proverb says that "the crown of a man is in his hands". Culture is man's crown. Therefore the question of culture and the Christian Faith is very important as exemplified by the fact that since the time of our Lord and the early Church, it has continued to come upon every generation of Christians in new and demanding ways.

Three recent world gatherings of Christians spoke about culture. I quote some statements from them. The Conference on Salvation Today at Bangkok, Thailand in 1973, said: "Culture shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ". The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974 spoke of "the rise of Churches deeply rooted in Christ and closely related to their culture. Culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture. Because man is God's creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he has fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic". The World Council of Churches Faith Assembly in Nairobi in 1975 said: "Despite all of our cultural differences, despite the structures in society and in the Church that obscure our confession of Christ, and despite our own sinfulness, we affirm and confess Christ together, for we have found that He is not alien to any culture and that He redeems and judges in all our societies."

(b) Working definition of culture

In this address, culture will be used to mean human pattern of p. 184 life in response to man's environment. This pattern is expressed in physical forms, (such as agriculture, the arts, technology, etc.) in inter-human relations (such as institutions, laws, customs, etc.), and in the form of reflection on the total reality of life (such as language, philosophy, religion, spiritual values, world view, the riddle of life-birth-death, etc.).

In this respect, African culture is like any other culture in the world. We can also speak of African cultures in the plural, if we wish to draw attention to regional and local expressions of culture. But for our purposes I will use culture generically in the singular.

II. THE GOSPEL AND CULTURE

(a) God takes the initiative

“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” ([John 3:16](#)). This is the well known biblical statement about God in His love invading man in his culture. The Incarnation of our Lord was God’s act of intercepting human and cosmic history. The Gospel was revealed to the world, in the context and language of culture, and not in an empty vacuum. This revelation took place in a specific cultural place, Palestine, among a specific people, the Jews, at a specific movement, two thousand years ago. Since then the Gospel has been proclaimed, propagated and accepted within the cultural milieux of the peoples of the world. God gave us the Gospel. Man gives us culture. When the Gospel and culture meet, and if the Christian Faith is generated, then Christianity is the result.

(b) 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. In this global outreach, the Gospel has been carried on the wings of culture. [Acts 2](#) is the classical record of how the Gospel and culture became intimate partners. “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place ... 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 [p. 185](#) 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. Without cultural transmission, the Gospel might as well have remained and been forgotten in Jerusalem. 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. The Gospel is a stranger in every culture—a stranger who settles down, when it is so accepted by Faith, and yet a stranger who continues to wander on from culture to culture, from generation to generation, calling all people to a newness of life in Christ. The Gospel is greater than any single culture and all cultures put together.

(c) African Response to the Gospel

Conversion to the Gospel takes place within a cultural framework. The Gospel has been and should continue to be proclaimed within the melodies of our African culture—through words of our one thousand languages, through the vibrant tunes of our three thousand musical instruments, through the joyous rhythm of our bodies and the solemn symbols of our artists. It is within our culture that we have to wrestle with the demands of the Gospel, and it is within our culture that we have to propagate the Gospel of our Lord. The Gospel does not throw out culture: to the contrary, it comes into our culture, it settles there, it brings its impact on our total life within that culture. It is within our culture that God loves us and calls us to repentance; it is also within our culture that God wants us to love, worship and obey Him. God does not want us to be aliens to our culture—but only aliens to sin. Our 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. [p. 186](#)

(d) 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. We have no right to imagine that we can monopolize the Gospel or keep it only to ourselves. The Gospel is not the property of European or American culture, neither should we make it the property of our African cultural plurality as the Gospel gets to be proclaimed in all societies of the world. One can say: “this is our culture, this is our culture,” but nobody can say: “this is my Gospel, this is our Gospel” This belongs to Jesus Christ, and it refuses to be made the exclusive property of any one culture, or nation, or region, or generation.

So then each culture must count it a privilege to have the Gospel as its guest. African culture must extend its hospitality to the Gospel as an honoured guest that, hopefully, may stay for many centuries and millenia as the case may be. Some cultures of the world have rejected the Gospel while others have restricted its effectiveness. It is tragic when a culture—perhaps through no fault of its own—rejects the Gospel, closes its doors to the Gospel, or turns a deaf ear to the Gospel. Each culture is in danger of doing this, sometimes dramatically and forcefully, sometimes slowly and imperceptibly. So let our African culture treat the Gospel with respect, with gentleness with all due hospitality—or it is a divine message coming into frail cultural vessels.

III. AFRICAN CULTURE AND CHRISTIANITY

(a) “He who has never travelled thinks that his mother is the only good cook in the world” (an African proverb).

We have established that Christianity is the end result of the Gospel coming into a given culture whose people respond to the Gospel through Faith. As such, there is no divine form of Christianity which is 100 per cent suitable for all peoples and at all times. Every form of Christianity has its impurities—because of man’s sinfulness. Therefore every cultural setting has a right [p. 187](#) to evolve its own form or expression of Christianity. No single form of Christianity should dominate another.

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 circumcised before they could become Christians (according to the form of Christianity developed in the home countries of those missionaries). There is no theological justification for this kind of burden. Already at the time of the Apostles the Gentile Christians faced a similar burden from 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](#)), This sparked off a major controversy in the early Church, which had to be settled in what was probably the first Christian Council to be held. Saint James spoke much sense when he told the assembly that: “My judgement is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God” ([Acts 15:19](#)). I wish that this judgement would have been observed by our brethren from overseas who brought us the Gospel of Christ. Sometimes Africans have been pressured or hypnotised into being converted to a foreign culture, rather than to the Gospel. Consequently, the Church in Africa is paying heavily for this tragic short-sightedness.

Cultural imperialism must terminate first, in order to allow the indigenous culture to relate more effectively to the Gospel, on its own terms and without pressure from outside. With humility and gratitude let us borrow and learn from other cultures, but let us not become their cultural slaves. The only lasting form of Christianity in this continent, 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 this kind of Christianity that should grow out of the spontaneous free impregnation of the Gospel in the fertile womb of African culture. Another 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 of a permanent home for Christianity in Africa. Until we can cultivate a genuine Christianity which is p. 188 truly MADE IN AFRICA, we will be building on a shallow foundation and living on borrowed time. Let it be said once and for all, as loudly as technology can make it, that IMPORTED CHRISTIANITY WILL NEVER, NEVER QUENCH THE SPIRITUAL THIRST OF AFRICAN PEOPLES. The wisdom of our forefathers speaks clearly about this, in a proverb: "That which comes from charity is never sufficient to fill the granary." Thank God for the missionaries from Europe and America who, in recent centuries, have brought us the Gospel. Africa wants and needs the Gospel. But Africa does not require imported Christianity, because too much of it will only castrate us spiritually or turn us into spiritual cripples who can only move on broken and imported crutches.

(b) Africa has enough tools to evolve a viable Christianity

The only tools needed to evolve a viable form of Christianity are: the Gospel, Faith and Culture. Thank God, we have these three fundamental tools now in plenty in our continent. With them we are obliged to fill the spiritual granaries of our peoples. Have we not enough musical instruments, for example, in this continent with which to raise the thunderous sound of the glory of God even unto the heaven of heavens? Have we not enough mouths in this continent, to sing the rhythms of the Gospel in our own tunes until it settles in our bloodstream? Have we not enough artistic talents in this continent to expose and express the mysteries of our Faith? Have we not enough hearts in this continent, to contemplate the marvels of the Christian Faith? Have we not enough problems and spiritual needs in this continent, with which to concern the riches of the Gospel? Have we not enough intellectuals in this continent to reflect and theologize on the meaning of the Gospel? Have we not enough feet on this continent, to carry the Gospel to every corner of this globe?

What more, then, do we need? Why then have we to continue living on borrowed Christianity when all the necessary tools are present with us? Thanks be to God for His Gospel, thanks to the missionaries who brought it across the seas to our forefathers, thanks to the riches of our cultural heritage by means of which this Gospel can be understood, articulated and propagated. But shame be to those who think falsely that God speaks only English or French or Latin. God has a thousand tongues in this continent p. 189 by which to speak to us about the mystery of His will and plan for the world. If God did not speak through African languages, there would not be today the 180 million Christians on this continent. Let us, therefore, not put to silence any of these tongues by which he speaks; let us not erase these channels of communication through which He makes Himself known; let us not tread under our feet these cultural vessels of African peoples by means of which He is worshipped, adored, proclaimed, believed and hoped in.

Unless we can adequately become the depositaries of the Gospel, unless it can stretch out its roots in our cultural setting, we as the peoples of this continent, shall be found unfaithful in the sight of God, and a day would come when He would take away the Gospel. The Gospel is like a submarine: it does not sit on the water, but moves deep down in the depths of the ocean—and if that water is not deep enough for it, then it moves away to other regions. It is my belief that our cultural waters are deep enough to contain the Gospel.

IV. AFRICAN CULTURE AND CHURCH LIFE (ABRIDGED)

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

1) *Worship*: Christians are called to worship God in Spirituality which bears witness to their Faith. Worship takes on many forms and has many aspects such as architecture, traditional African music and prayer forms, the home and family in worship life, the community approach to worship and the Sacraments, as the use of religious dancing in worship, clapping of hands, confession of sin, exorcism of troublesome spirits, 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, hence this overlapping concept 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. In African traditional world view, the well-being of man is intimately connected with the well-being of the total creation. "There is corporate sinfulness of man and p. 190 creation, there is also corporate hope of man and creation to be set free at the culmination of the purposes of God ..."

3) *Church Nurture and Education*: In the African setting, the home has always been the centre of nurture and education for the children. I suggest that true Christian life must be cultivated and nurtured first and foremost at home, and only in a secondary and broader way, in the Church building and through the Church institutions. I believe that there is much to be said about "home churches" in Africa. It is at home where the Bible will be read, discussed, and given time to 'sink' into the spiritual book of the faithful.

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. We can only mention a few examples of these, such as: love, truth, justice, the right of life, the 'right' use of sex, freedom, etc. These values and ethics cannot be applied or taught in a vacuum. They have to be related to the living, existential situations of African peoples in their cultural milieu—whether in terms of individuals, communities, nations, or international affairs.

5) *Christian Service and witness*: Corporate life, community life and Church life, are not life in isolation. It is at the very heart of what our Lord Himself did: He went about preaching the Gospel, healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the hungry ... African Church life must reflect and incarnate this work of our Lord, within the context of the people of Africa. There are many who are ready to listen to the Gospel—but they must hear it in their own languages and life situations. There are many who are sick, and the Gospel must bring them hope, healing and newness of life. There are many who are spiritually and morally dead, politically oppressed, economically exploited, socially ostracised. The Gospel and the Church must bring healing to them all. Evangelism has two dimensions: the human effort, and the divine superintendence. On the human level, evangelism must be related to the culture of the people concerned. Therefore, no cultural element should be left out, if it can be used in evangelism and for the nurture of the people of God. 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 p. 191 its own history is not without fault.

6) *The Christian and his culture*: 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.

7) *The Bible and African Culture*: Language itself is a major cultural element. African cultural elements enter the Biblical period. The process of translation is, in fact reciprocal.

African readers of the Scripture, feel much at home in parts of the Old Testament. Thus: respect (for the aged, for parents, for authority), justice, truth, friendship, hospitality, the value of children, marriage customs, marriage gifts, etc., can be given as examples to illustrate this point. There are historical and mythological parallels, ethical parallels, and parallels in world-views, etc. 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 experiences. It is also the Bible that gives us the basis for judging culture.

8) *Culture and the Gospel as allies*: 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.

CONCLUSION

(a) African Culture Must Bring Glory To God

If we take it that the Gospel of our Lord is intended for the whole man in the whole world (*oikumene*) the whole cosmos and the whole creation ([Mt. 28:19](#), [Mk. 16:15](#), [Eph. 1:91](#), [II Cor 5:17](#), [Col 1:15-20](#) etc.), then the Church must take African culture seriously. It must ask how the Gospel is to work on culture and in culture so that it can manifest the transforming work of Christ [p. 192](#) in creating all things anew. In the book of Revelation, 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.

The Cross of Jesus Christ was, in fact, a fabrication of culture—a Roman method of punishing criminals. But, that which was an actuality of torture, oppression, punishment and death, was lifted out of its debasement into a symbol and actuality of our Salvation. A human cultural form of degradation and affliction was turned by God into a form of glorification ([John 3:14](#), [7:39](#), [8:28](#), [12:23](#), etc.) and the human foolishness became God’s power and wisdom ([1 Cor 1:23f](#), etc.). Once yielded to the Gospel, even the weakest of our cultural expressions and elements can be used of God to bring glory to Him. We must not, therefore, hide away our culture from the Gospel: instead, we have to lay it before the Gospel, and use it for the Gospel.

(b) 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, it 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 exercise 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. I do not advocate a rejection of

culture, but I advocate a merciful judgement of our culture by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
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(c) Ecumenical Openness Towards Other Cultures

One must plead for a deep sense of humility in our use of African culture, because the Gospel is present also in other cultures of the world—it is not our own exclusive property. All cultures have a right and access to the Gospel—and they will express its presence in ways that may not be the same as ours. We need, therefore, to cultivate a genuine openness—an ecumenical openness that is willing to share and receive the meaning of the Gospel in other cultures. Indeed, many of the things I have said about African culture in this lecture, are equally applicable to other cultures.

We must realise that we belong to the world-wide Church, and Christian fellowship demands that we mutually share the riches of our experience in Jesus Christ. Just as the cultures of Palestine, the Mediterranean and Europe, carried and conveyed the Gospel to other parts of the world—we too should carry the same Gospel and share it with other parts of the world. “Freely you have received, freely give”. ([Mt. 10:8](#), cf. [John 1:16](#)). So our Lord reminded us. The Church has become truly global in this century, therefore, Christians should seek the ways and means of sharing the grace of God so as to take into account this globalness, and to appreciate the global outreach of the Gospel.

For a large numbers of Christians, the ecumenical movement—whether expressed locally or in its world-wide manifestations—seems to offer the possibility for sharing this global expression of the Gospel and Christian fellowship. We have to learn to live together to be Christians together, to share our riches and our problems in response to the will of God for our world. African Church leaders would do well to study carefully the ecumenical movement, to listen carefully to what the Spirit of God is saying to the Church through this movement.

There is nothing secret about it, and that which is based on faith in Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, certainly deserves the attention and affection of all Christian. This ecumenical movement also takes cultures seriously, since the Gospel wanders from culture to culture and the confession or proclamation of Christ is made within these cultures of the whole mankind.

(d) An Agenda For Further Consideration

1. A clarification of cultural elements that are common and/or p. 194 different, in the Bible and in African Societies.
2. The use of African cultural elements and creativity in Church life.
3. Serious attention be given to contemporary areas of African cultural expressions and activities, such as modern literature, art, drama, music, dance, entertainment, press, radio, television etc. This is to enable the Church to keep up with cultural change.
4. The question of the relationship between culture and leadership in the light of the Gospel, both within and outside the Church in a variety of such issues as hierarchy, respect, authority, human rights, role and dignity of women and children, etc. The New Testament speaks of leaders who are servants rather than masters of their people.
- 5 Identity as expressed through culture, and identity as expressed in Christ. How can one be simultaneously and harmoniously an African (by culture) and a Christian (by faith)?
6. Culture and the Ecumenical Movement—the contexts in which the Christian Faith is embraced and expressed throughout the world today, the mobility of people and ideas, the meaning of Christian fellowship in a global scale etc.

7. Culture and Communication in terms of: sharing information, evangelism, propagation of ideas, ideology and culture, propaganda and culture, indoctrination and culture, etc. What is the role of the Church in Africa, in all these areas?
8. Inter-cultural encounters, particularly through language, social intercourse, symbols, modern technology and mass media. Where is the Church in the complex world of cultural encounters? What is its specific role?
9. In the area of culture and change, people are both actors and spectators. Africa is going through such change. What then is the particular Christian contribution in Africa today in this process?
10. There is a strong invasion of western and technological cultures upon African culture, producing a dynamic cultural interaction. African culture has also influenced other parts of the world, at different times in history. In this process, there is borrowing, adapting, copying, and imitation. How far has the Church been instrumental in this process, and to what extent should it continue to play that role? p. 195
11. A careful study or understanding is needed about the impact of the Bible on African culture.
12. What are the areas of cultural bankruptcy and decay as we look at our African culture today? Culture has its limitations, and these should be clearly recognised. What does the Gospel judge and save in our culture?
13. The question of how we can prompt or facilitate the Gospel to deepen its roots in African culture.
14. What is the message of the Gospel to our culture in the areas of human problems and needs, such as oppression, exploitation, poverty, starvation, injustice, destruction of human life, extravagant spoliation of nature, pollution and dangers to human survival (such as armaments, wars, domination, even science and technology)? How can the Gospel raise an alarm through our culture in these areas of urgent concerns?
15. Africa lacks a theology of culture, as indeed of many other issues. The more we open up the issue, the sooner a theology of culture will evolve, hopefully to aid the Church in coming to terms with African culture at all levels.

(e) Christian First, Then African (American, German, etc.)

Christian leadership in Africa should be well equipped to help the Christians in responding simultaneously to the demands of the Gospel and the demands of their culture. Sometimes these demands will overlap and be complementary, sometimes they will be neutral to each other, and sometimes they will be mutually opposed or contradictory. The Christian should be enabled to distinguish between these possibilities, and consequently to act, to decide and to speak with freedom, when confronted by the situation. Culture can be “all powerful” over an individual—at least temporarily. The Gospel is “all powerful”, at least ultimately. We need to assimilate this temporality of culture and this ultimatum of Gospel—simultaneously, meaningfully, and harmoniously. Culture says to each one of us: “You are mine, you belong to me. I have made you truly an African, a Muganda, a Nigerian, or an American. You owe me allegiance.” To the Christian there comes also the Gospel voice which says: “But you are mine. I have saved you. I have bought you with a price. You are deeply valuable. You belong to me and I am jealous p. 196 because I wish to own you entirely to be mine ... I am making you a new creation.”

It is not easy for many Christians in the world to say whether they are first and foremost “African”, “European”, “Asian” or whatever else their culture has made them: or whether first and foremost they are Christian. For many the first choice is what their culture has made them, and later they are Christian.

But the New Testament order is: first Christian, and then Jew or African, beggar or king, male or female. We have no choice other than to be first Christian, and then African, cost what it will, first Christian, and then American, cost what it will, first Christian and then Indian or English, cost what it will. The trouble comes when we reverse this Gospel order—and many there are who fall into that temptation.

(f) Eschatology, Culture and the Gospel

We must finish with the difficult question of the relationship between the Gospel, culture and the future. Culture has no eschatology: it is concerned with our past and present and promises no special goal in time and history. It may boast of a golden age, but it knows not of paradise regained.

In contrast, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is intensely eschatological, and draws everything towards its conclusion and finality (*telos*). Culture knows how to bury the dead, but it does not know what to do with the soul of man in the final analysis because it has no resurrection so to speak. Culture has limitations beyond which it cannot take mankind. Therefore, the Gospel must take over from where culture reaches its limits. While culture and the Gospel may work as allies, it is the responsibility of the Gospel to knock down the cultural idols and chains which may otherwise detain man from reaching the promised land of his faith in Christ. The Gospel is deeply protective and jealous, to make sure that culture does not monopolise and keep man forever on the cultural level of life alone. There are other values and heights beyond those of culture. Therefore the Christian is a cultural pilgrim, and not a settler, moving even with his cultural luggage towards the eschatological goal of the Gospel. To this end, the Church must equip its people to be faithful and courageous pilgrims under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In my judgement that is the essence of Christianity. And here lies the most difficult, [p. 197](#) and yet most exciting, piece of homework for Church leaders, not only in Africa but throughout the whole world.

As an African proverb says: “He who guides you by night can be trusted by day;” I pray that God may enable you to guide His people by night and by day. Amen.

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Christianity and African Culture a Review

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WHY is a review of a lecture delivered at the Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly held in Nairobi in December 1976 still valid? There are several reasons for this. First, even