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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**

*by* TITE TIENOU

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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

though more than two years have passed since PACLA, its full impact has not yet been felt. As developments take place as a result of PACLA (for instance the coming South African Christian Leadership Assembly), much will be said and written about the momentous Nairobi gathering. For this reason it is worth examining one of the important lectures delivered in plenary session.

Secondly, the subject itself is very important and has abiding theological relevance both in a general sense (the Gospel and Culture) and in a particular situation (Christianity and African, Asian, European, American Culture). Because man is a cultural being and because culture is forever changing, there can be no final word on the relationship between Christianity and any human culture. In recent years, the subject has come increasingly to the forefront of world theological debate as exemplified in the 1973 Bangkok Conference on Salvation Today, the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, the 1975 Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, and the 1978 Willowbank Consultation on the Gospel and Culture. It is a paradox of our times that the world is becoming more and more a global village (and this includes the cultural realm) yet, never in human history has so much been said about cultural distinctives and particularities. It is as if we all seek refuge and security in those distinctives and particularities. Because of this hardening of cultural attitudes, p. 199 we need to critically examine our own culture if we want to prevent our theologies from becoming too provincial and too culturally tainted.

Thirdly, Professor John Mbiti is well known among African theologians and even considered by some to be the spokesman for African theology. For this reason anything written by him is worth reading. The editor(s) of the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* must have felt the importance of the lecture for they printed it *verbatim* in the issue of September 1977, No. 20, pp. 26–40.<sup>1</sup> In his conclusion, under the heading “An Agenda for further consideration”, Professor Mbiti encourages us Africans to pursue the matter further when he writes: “Africa lacks a theology of culture ... 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 cultures at all levels” (p. 38). The present review article is an effort to contribute to the opening of the issue.

## THE DEFINITION OF AFRICAN CULTURE

After stating the importance of the topic, Professor Mbiti offers a working definition of culture as a “human pattern of life in response to man’s environment” (p 26) This definition is as satisfactory as any other. The author then continues by affirming that “in this respect, African culture is like any other culture in the world” (*loc. cit.*) which sounds like an echo of the first sentence of the preface of his book *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: S.P.C.K., 1970): “African peoples are not religiously illiterate.” Nobody—at least no African—would disagree with such assertions nowadays. But the following is less likely of unanimous agreement: “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” (p. 26). One may ask: are African ethnic cultures merely regional and local expressions of *an* African culture? Furthermore, the author does not explain why he takes “culture generically in the singular” nor how it is possible to do so. P. 200

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<sup>1</sup> Page references are according to the printed article of the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*.

It is, of course, clear that Africa is not culturally homogenous. There are nevertheless some elements which seem to be common to all African peoples: they have the same conception of the relationship between cause and effect; they conceive of space and time the same way; they have the same view of knowledge, the only valid knowledge is a practical one; and for them community is very important.<sup>2</sup> While these four elements, among others, make it possible for us to speak of African culture in the singular, we should never forget that African cultures are numerous<sup>3</sup> and that in no way are the diverse African ethnic cultures only regional and local expressions of culture. If we do not minimize the heterogeneity of African cultures, we will be able to safeguard ourselves against the temptation of easy extrapolation and generalization. What is true of West African cultures is not necessarily true of East African cultures. What is true of the culture of one ethnic group in a given country is not necessarily true of the culture of another ethnic group.

I know that such statements are not popular in this age of African unity but realism commands us not to see unity where, in fact, there is diversity. Let me illustrate by citing one instance of over-generalization in Mbiti's lecture. Under the section "The Bible and African Culture" he points out such important African cultural elements and values which find parallels in the Bible as: respect for the aged, for parents, for authority; justice, truth, friendship, hospitality, the value of children, marriage customs being the necessity to get married, marriage gifts, protection of women, divorce customs, plural wives especially for leaders such as chiefs and kings, inheriting the wife of one's dead brother, etc. (p. 35). He further enumerates cultural elements which are hated in African life and in the Bible. But, enumerating elements from African culture may mislead readers into thinking that those elements are the same for all ethnic groups. In the case of marriage customs, for instance, Professor Mbiti is certainly aware of the fact that they differ widely across the continent. One cannot just cite six or seven elements of a complex social institution such as marriage. There are, of course, ethnic groups in Africa where one inherits the wife of one's dead brother but there are also others where one inherits the wife of one's dead father (provided she is not your mother!). The danger of faulty extrapolation should cause us to do meticulous basic research in this field, as in any other, before attempting generalization. In spite of the foregoing criticism, Professor Mbiti is certainly right in stressing the similarities between African and Biblical cultures; in this respect, the Bible is the Book of the African's Christian Faith and cultural life (p. 35).

## **THE DEFINITION OF CHRISTIANITY**

After the definition of culture which is presented in the introduction (Part I), Mbiti proceeds in Part II, to the issue of the Gospel and Culture. Part III and Part IV are respectively: African Culture and Christianity and African Culture and Church Life, before the conclusion (Part V). In Part II, under the heading "God takes the Initiative", the author states: "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" (p. 27). This statement is visualized in a diagram (p. 28). What must we understand by such a definition of Christianity? Some of us equate the Gospel with Christianity but for Mbiti, the Gospel + Culture + Faith produce Christianity. There are then different forms of

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<sup>2</sup> Fontus, Fritz "L'Afrique noire et la theologie chretienne" ICHTHUS, No. 55-56 (October-November 1975) pp. 50-51.

<sup>3</sup> Sanon, Anselme Titianma *Tierce Eglise, ma mere* (Bobo-Dioulasso: Imprimerie de la Savane, 1977) p. 260.

Christianity depending on the culture with which the Gospel interacts. Although this is not the classical definition of Christianity, it is helpful in explaining the differences found in the Christian movement from culture to culture. To me the most disturbing is the omission of a clear definition of the Gospel. The reader may understand the Gospel to be either Jesus Christ himself, God's "love invading man in his culture" (p. 27) or as something which "belongs to Jesus Christ" (p. 29). Had the author provided us with a clear definition of the Gospel, one would ask fewer questions about his definition of Christianity.

But, regardless of what one thinks of this way of understanding Christianity, it is an important premise in Mbiti's lecture. Because of it he can make statements such as: p. 202

"... 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 to evolve its own form or expression of Christianity" (p. 29).

And:

"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." (p. 30) and finally:

"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" (p. 31).

How the reader should understand this last image of "cultural waters containing the Gospel", the author does not say. Consequently, there may be many interpretations leading to misunderstandings. The following is another instance where a figure of speech used by Mbiti led to misunderstanding.

## **THE GOSPEL AS A GUEST**

After establishing the fact that the Gospel cannot be the exclusive property of any one culture, Mbiti had this to say by way of conclusion:

"... 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 ... So let our African culture treat the Gospel with respect, with gentleness, with all due hospitality—for it is a divine message coming into frail cultural vessels" (p. 29).

Speaking of the Gospel as a guest is, in itself, a cultural way of communicating not readily understood by people of other cultures. Some readers and hearers (especially western) have taken the expression to mean that Mbiti thinks the Gospel is relative and temporary in African culture. They have no doubt, from their own cultural heritage, thought of the guest as a temporary dweller p. 203 with no authority in the house while the host is permanent and endowed with all authority to rule his household. So they have seen in this expression of Mbiti's an illustration of a theological relativism, putting culture above the Gospel. But this is a wrong inference. If there is theological relativism in Mbiti's writings, it must be found somewhere else. Unfortunately, this appears to be another instance of Evangelical rash accusation without proper basis.

We African Evangelicals must refrain from such easy criticism and engage in solid detailed research upon which we can base our assertions. This will make our case stronger.

So, in what sense can the Gospel be called a guest? Obviously this must be understood against the background of hospitality in Africa. Hospitality has been thought by some to be the key to the understanding of cultural conversion in Africa for it weaves reciprocal relationships of integration and welcome.<sup>4</sup> If indeed this is the case, then speaking of the Gospel as a guest means that one seeks to welcome and integrate it in such a way that it is no longer foreign. This appears to be the reasoning of Mbiti. It seems that his way of expressing his thought here points to a greater and more complex problem: is there only one cultural mode of doing theology? Or, are we from the so-called Third World, the only ones to make the jump from one cultural heritage to another which is thought (consciously or unconsciously) to be universal? These are important questions as many of us from the Third World are frustrated with the imbalance in the methodology, and even in the finality, of theology. Mbiti expresses this frustration elsewhere in these terms: "... the Church has become kerygmatically universal, but is still theologically provincial ..."<sup>5</sup>. If we all made the effort seriously to take into account the fact that, in a real sense, we are already in the age of "culturally differentiated christianities"<sup>6</sup> then figures of speech such as this would not create unnecessary misunderstanding for we would be sensitive enough to ask "what does he mean?" before making any judgment. p. 204

It is rather unfortunate that the expression "the Gospel as a guest" has caught the attention of hearers and readers around the world thus becoming the tree which hides the forest. For the meaning of the expression is made clear when the author addresses himself to the issue of "African Culture and Christianity." His call is to free African Christians from cultural circumcision and cultural imperialism (pp. 29–30) so that their culture may relate to the Gospel without undue borrowing from outside culture. To this effect he quotes this African proverb: "A bee does not start a new home with honey" which means that, as the bee starts with raw materials and produces honey, so Christians in Africa must take the raw materials of the Gospel and their own culture to produce a Christianity made in Africa (p. 30). Mbiti emphasizes his point by stating: "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*" (p. 30 - Italics his), before quoting another African proverb: "That which comes from charity is never sufficient to fill the granary." Clearly what he means is that we cannot take someone else's guest and make him our own. If the Gospel is to stay in Africa and speak to Africans it must not be a "borrowed" guest but an invited one.

Does this mean then that Africa must become a cultural ghetto, refusing any relations with outside cultures? Certainly not, for Mbiti calls African Christians to manifest an ecumenical openness towards other cultures (p. 37). Even with an openness towards other cultures, some may say, there still remains a danger in cultivating a Christianity made in Africa. Let us remember, however, that this danger is to be faced by Christians in all cultures as is evidenced, for instance, by what Kenneth Kantzer says about the Americanization of the Church: "It would be far truer to say that America has conquered

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<sup>4</sup> Sanon, Anselme Tiianma *op. cit.* pp. 190, 192.

<sup>5</sup> Mbiti, John S. "Theological Impotence" in *Mission Trends* No. 3, ed. by G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky (New York/Grand Rapids: Paulist Press/Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976) p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Chenu, Bruno "Point de vue d'un theologien Europeen" *Lumiere et Vie*, (Nov.–Dec. 1974) T. XXIII, No. 120, p. 81.



the Church than that the Church has conquered America.”<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the Americanization of the Church is not better than the Africanization of it—if this means that a particular culture domesticates the Gospel. What is needed, therefore, is not a refusal to relate the Gospel to culture but rather a continued subjection of our own culture to the judgment of the Gospel. p. 205

## CONCLUSION

We have mentioned the most salient features of Mbiti’s article, the essential argument of which is “the positive use of our culture in Church life” (p. 36). Instances of this positive use are: worship, the community, Church nurture and education, Christian values and ethics, Christian service and witness (pp. 31–34). For this, according to the author, “African culture needs to be studied, analysed, and utilized in the evolution of relevant spirituality and worship life of the Church” (p. 31). The necessity to integrate Christianity with African culture runs like an Ariadne thread in Mbiti’s and other African writers;<sup>8</sup> it has been felt as far back as the second half of the nineteenth century by people like Mojola Agbebi.<sup>9</sup> One would have thought that we were beyond stressing the need and into specifics. It is precisely for this reason that Mbiti’s article is somewhat disappointing. Given the title *Christianity and African Culture*, one hopes to find specific and definitive treatment of the subject. But this is not the case; the only specific section is “African Culture and Church Life” (pp. 31–36) which still remains rather general. In his conclusion Mbiti offers a fifteen point agenda for further consideration (pp. 37–38) which should have been the object of his article. Unless we deal with these points specifically, I am afraid we will accomplish little more than stressing the need to do this and that, which can be only empty slogans. Granted it is a difficult exercise but the reward is great for the rooting of the Gospel in our continent.

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# Humanism and the Kingdom of God

by KLAUS BOCKMUEHL

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<sup>7</sup> Kantzer, Kenneth S. “Evangelicalism and the Inerrancy Question” *Christianity Today* (April 21, 1978) Vol. XXII, No. 14, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Mbiti, John S. “Theological Impotence” *op. cit.*, p. 11; Ayandele, E. A. *A Visionary of the African Church* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971) p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ayandele, E. A. *op. cit.*, p. 4.