Inculturation in a Post-Modern Africa: A Reflection on Salient Issues

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzed the concept of "Inculturation" in a post-modern Africa. Through the use of historical phen.omenological method, the paper averred that Inculturation of Christianity in a post-modern Africa is a herculean task that demands absolute caution. Hence, the paper discussed some salient issues such as the Evolutionary nature of African culture, the Unity of the Christendom and the Christian ecological concern, which should be put into serious consideration in the entire process of inculturation in Africa in order to safeguard the essence of the gospel of Christ and to meet contemporary challenges.

Keywords: Inculturation, Christianity, African cultural values, European missionaries, Post-modern Africa, African Christianity.

Introduction

Over decades, the concept of inculturation has been on the front burner of theological discourse in African Continent and beyond. This was largely triggered by the Second Vatican Council held on 11th October, 1962 at St. Peters Basilica in the Vatican in which a strong case was made for the cultural adaptation of Christianity in Africa-an idea which has spawned into several terms like 'Inculturation' 'Acculturation' 'Enculturation' 'Inter-culturation' 'Incarnation' 'Africanization' 'Adaptation' and 'Indigenization" of Christianity in Africa. According to John Paul II, "A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out" (Ezechi 2011:221). And Mbiti (1969: 3) insightfully argued that "since traditional religions occupy the whole person and the whole of his life, conversion to new religion like Christianity must embrace his language, thought patterns, fears, social relationships, attitudes and philosophical disposition, if that conversion is to make a lasting impact upon the individual and his community." Hence efforts are over the years, being channeled towards a successful inculturation of Christianity which aims at making the church more at home in Africa, and Africans more at home in the church. This, of course, is in line with the declaration of the Second Vatican Council, which says that, the church "is not tied exclusively or indissolubly to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life, or to any customary practices, ancient or modern" (Mbefo 1982:11).

But before these declarations of the Vatican Council II, the need for a "home-made" Christianity or African Christianity was conspicuously observed in the lives of African Christians. Indeed, "so soon after the implanting of Christianity in Africa, and just as the foreign missionaries are arriving home…the love of many has gone cold" (www.gerogeehusanyi.org). Many African Christians became guilty of double standard as they could not disconnect completely from the primal or pristine religion of their fore-bearers and the values it offered. Hence, they paid double allegiance, as they became good Christians, when the going is smooth, but when it gets tough, they resort to their traditional religion. This is because Christianity as thought by the European Missionaries gave rise to pertinent questions. Some of these questions which bother the typical African and for instance, an average Igbo man of Eastern Nigeria, include:

> Does being a Christian mean that I cannot take the Ozo title? That I cannot bury my dead in the traditional way? Why should I change my name that arose out of my matrix and which has meaning and relevance in that matrix for a foreign name which people find difficult to pronounce; foreign names which are truly foreign? What does a celibate priesthood tell a polygamous culture? Why does the liturgy of the church by-pass the liturgy of traditional religions that have always mediated transcendence to our people? (Mbefo 1989:4).

And more importantly, what happens to our ancestors who lived, loved, died but, in the words of Birago Diop "never gone"? These questions indeed bother on the core cultural values of Africans expressed in symbols that appeal to their world of realities and experience. However, the European Missionaries could not read meanings into all these things that interest the African man. Consequently, "this, among other things, has resulted in the tragedy of establishing since the missionary expansion of the nineteenth century only a very superficial type of Christianity on African soil."(Mbiti, 1969: 15). And according to Mbefo (1989:28) "with the experienced massive defections from the church, one is disposed to affirm that Christianity as rendered by the Europeans has been found wanting" . Hence, the concept of inculturation formed one of the major themes at the

Second Vatican Council on 11th October 1962, and the subsequent Synod of Bishops for Africa which took place in May, 1994.

The whole idea has been to make Christianity respond adequately to the facts and specifics of other world cultures, including African culture. To this effect, many theories on how to achieve a successful inculturation of Christianity into other cultures have been advanced. While this is not a place to discuss these theories, it is pertinent to note that the process of inculturation is gradually in progress in Africa; and the methods are impressively eclectic.

However, there are some salient issues which should be put into serious considerations, while this inculturation process continues in the Continent. The analysis of these salient issues is the main thrust of this paper.

The Concept of Inculturation in Africa

According to Ezechi (2011:235) "the basic notion about inculturation is the expression of the dynamic relation between the Christian gospel and world cultures… it is for the consolidation of the faith". It is a process or attempt to find or root Christianity in different cultures of the world. Specifically, it refers to a movement for the Africanization or indigenization of Christianity in Africa. This became necessary, following the failure of the European Missionaries to "root the gospel message solidly unto the African word of meaning, reality-structure, survival thrust or the African conceptual framework"(www.georgeehusani.org) -a failure, which resulted in a seemingly alienation and estrangement of the church in African soil. Perhaps this prompted Paul IV in 1975, to ask thus:

> Does the church in Africa retain a certain Christian religious form that was brought in from outside and which makes her, as it were, a stranger or pilgrim among her people? Should new and more suitable means be sought in theology and in pastoral practice? (Mbefo 1989:9).

Christian faith should be made real in African situation. Ezechi (2011:236) has observed that "the Christian faith is one, but the manner of expression varies from time to time, from place to place". Hence, inculturation is the contextualization of the Christian faith. It responds to the immediate existential realities in a cultural milieu.

According to the document titled *"The Roman Liturgy and Inculturation: IVth Instruction for the Right Application of the Conciliar Constitution on the Liturgy"*, the process of inculturation in Africa was viewed from the perspective of 'Adaptation' in which Christianity adapts to African cultural facts. Accordingly, Shorter (1973:69) has argued that "Adaptation" is a monomer because it suggests that Christianity somehow adapts itself. In fact, since it is not in itself a culture, Christianity cannot adapt itself without betraying itself". He, instead, sees inculturation from the perspective of "incarnation".

This of course, is in tandem with the position of the Synod of Bishops for Africa, which was held on 6th May, 1994, with the theme *"The Church in Africa and Her Evangelizing Mission, Towards the Third Millennium – You shall be my Witnesses"*. The African Bishops established that inculturation process can be successfully achieved in Africa, if it is applied from the point of view of incarnation. Christianity, just like in the doctrine of Jesus' incarnation, should be incarnated, and wear the form of African culture in order to achieve the ultimate meaning in Africa. According to Shorter (1973:69), in the understanding of 'inculturation' as 'incarnation'

> what really happens is that Christianity in one cultural dress encounters a non-Christian culture, and then tries to incarnate itself in the new culture. In doing this, it challenges and transforms the culture. Two processes are involved: the 'undressing' of Christianity from the foreign culture and the dressing of Christianity in the indigenous culture simultaneously – since you cannot have a culturally naked Christianity.

To Shorter, this is the best form of inculturation as against the pre-conciliar mission theological view of 'Adaptational Inculturation'. Buttressing this point, Ezechi (2011:259) observed that, the incarnational concept of inculturation recognizes the position of the church as one that enters into a people's field of experience – their cultural milieu. It lives in that culture and speaks its language with a view to revalidating it from within.

It is only when this is achieved in Africa, that Christianity and the church can feel at home in Africa, and Africans at home in the church. Consequently, and in line with the position of the 1994 Synod of African Bishops, the Nigerian Bishops at a Workshop held at Enugu in January 1995, drew out a Plan of Action for Inculturation of Christianity in Nigeria in which they stated that:

- The spirit of inculturation must henceforth permeate the entire curriculum of studies in seminaries and theological institutes in the country. It is not enough to teach Inculturation as a course, or organise short seminars on Inculturation. The same spirit of inculturation must permeate our homilies, retreat talks and seminars.
- Beyond the mere translation of texts and the adaptation of symbols and artifacts, our theological institutes should take up the challenge of studying more deeply the African traditions, cultures and religions, towards

the eventual inculturation of Catholic Fundamental Theology, Liturgy, Spirituality, Canon Law, Ecclesiology and Homiletics.

- A standing committee of the C.B.C.N. on inculturation already exists. The various provinces, dioceses, parishes and stations should have such committees on Inculturation, involving both the clergy and the laity.
- The Bishops' Conference should allow a period of experimentation on inculturation, encourage initiatives in inculturation, and possibly select particular parishes in each diocese for the purpose of inculturation.
- A new approach should be adopted towards African Traditional Religion; more effort should be made towards Christianizing African values that will enrich Christianity, such as found in initiation rites, marriage ceremonies, title taking, etc.
- In Nigeria, inculturation should be promoted along the lines of language and cultural groups, rather than through the existing dioceses and provinces. (www.georgeehusani.org).

Furthermore, the core cultural areas that would be practically considered in the inculturation process in Nigeria, as identified by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) include:

- Naming ceremony vis-a-vis sacrament of baptism and initiation rites.
- Inculturation of marriage.
- Prayers/Blessings to be composed for childless couples, different classes of sick people, etc.
- Rites for title-taking and chieftaincy.
- Blessing for land and the beginning of the planting season, harvest time and new yam festival.
- Composition of liturgical hymns in the vernacular.
- Study of witchcraft and African Traditional Religion.
- Writing of new text books relevant to African philosophy or worldview for our   Seminaries and religious houses. (www.georgeehusani.org).

These and more, go a long way to show how seriously the task of inculturation is being taken in Nigeria, and Africa as a whole.

Justifications for Inculturation in Africa
The following are the justifications for inculturation in Africa:

Christianity; a Foreign Religion
Christianity as was rendered by the first European Missionaries is a foreign religion, encoded in foreign culture. It was never tied to the culture of Africans, like the indigenous religion of their fore bearers. It was never rooted in the valuable cultural values and norms of which Africans are known for. Indeed, this is a failure on the part of these missionaries. These missionaries introduced the Christian faith without taking "African social facts and institutions into account" (Shorter 1973:157). They could not understand or find meaning in African cultural values expressed in their religious activities.

They rejected hitherto everything African, categorized them as barbaric and completely unholy for the Christian God. This rendered Africans as "epitome of barbarism, morons and primitive among other binary oppositions" (Advice and Mungwim 2010). African names were substituted for English ones; and "the age-grade system, the initiation rites that incorporate a person into society, the rites that celebrate the onset of pregnancy, birth, marriage, death and funeral ceremonies, harvest celebrations and other traditional feasts and festivals were often circumvented (www.georgeehusani.org). These missionaries "suppressed and supplanted the existing traditional religion and customs and replaced them with the imported religion of Christianity" (Onyeidu 2007:35). Indeed, it is to this extent that Africans see Christianity as a foreign religion.

But on the contrary, attempts have been made to disprove this belief that Christianity is a foreign religion. According to Mbefo (1989:17) "the argument exploits the concept of *'Katholikos'* (a Greek word meaning Universal) to prove that Christianity is a universal religion". According to Onaiyekan (1980:4) "Christianity is really no-man's religion, and… at a deeper level every man's religion". Hence, the need for adequate inculturation of the Christian faith into world cultures and African cultural milieu in particular is imperative.

Crisis of Faith and Commitment
This is a direct consequence of the Missionary oversight in the evangelization of Africa. It has been seriously observed that there is crisis of commitment in the lives of sizeable number of African Christians. According to Mbefo (1989:34):

> Despite their conversion to Christianity, many still consult the fortune tellers when they want to embark on a project. The same is true when a well thought out project flops or there is a sudden death or happenings that seem otherwise unaccounted for. "Chance" is not in their vocabulary. Many prefer the services of the native doctors to our modern hospitals. Some find

no contradiction in practicing both traditional religion and Christianity.

This is because Christianity as presented by the European Missionaries did not fully respond to African questions and as such, has not been accepted as way of life. And it has been observed that "since the new (Christian) religion is not rooted to the African world of meaning, it lacks organic vitality and therefore in moments of crisis, many Africans revert almost instinctively to the old time religion which provides answers to their questions about life, about the threat of life, and about their ancestors (www.georgeehusani.org).

Hence, there has been disenchantment and some have fallen back to the traditional answers in the belief that "the old is better". Indeed, cases of defections of erstwhile Christians converts to African traditional religion abound in the continent. However, a case of two Catholic Priests, Dr. Vincent Damuah and Dr. Enyeribe Onuoha in Ghana and Nigeria respectively, seems more relevant here. These priests defected from Catholic Church in order to revitalize the African religion. According to them, "African traditional religion is not inferior to other world religions" (Mbefo, 1989:32). Again, in the words of Mbefo (1989:28), "with the experienced massive defections from the church, one is disposed to affirm that Christianity has been found wanting".

Christianity as a Religion of the Oppressors
Africans have always found it difficult to dissociate the missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa, from the colonial masters whose imperialistic influence were deeply felt in Africa. This is because " the missionaries that stormed the continent of Africa with the salvific message of Jesus Christ arrived from Europe on the heels of their brothers whose message was not that of liberation, but that of political, economic and cultural subjugation in a system called colonialism" (www.georgeehusani.org). This historical linkage of evangelization with colonization has regrettably created a lasting impact on the African psyche that seems to be counter-productive for Christianity in the continent. It was as if Africans were presented with a double message – the gospel on the one hand and economic exploitation on the other. Africans could not distinguish the man who asked them to receive Jesus, from the man who asked them to pay taxes. For Africans, these men are the same; hence, the missionaries are seen as "agents of colonialism". According to Mbefo (1989:40):

> When Africans say that the missionaries are "agents of colonialism", they mean that missionaries used the Sermon on the Mount to reduce Africans to passivity and submissiveness and in that way made it easy for the colonialists to expropriate their lands. "Your reward shall be in heaven" was used to break African resistance, the type exhibited by the Maumau of Kenya and the Ekumeku of the Western Igbos.

Ezechi (2011:191) has reiterated that "Christianity had created in part the atmosphere that made the penetration of colonial government possible in the first place". No wonder, Jomo Kenyatta said that "when the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the Bible. They taught us to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible" (Mbefo 1989:17). Hence, Africans see Christianity as the religion of the oppressors that should be substituted with a homemade Christianity.

A Reflection on Salient Issues
There is no doubt that the task of inculturation is quite difficult, but not impossible. A critical look at the technicalities involved in the entire process, would make one wish that the first European Missionaries did a proper rooting of Christianity in African culture alb initio. The task of inculturation is similar to the task of re-introduction of Christian faith in Africa in the manner that would reflect the African world-views, value-systems and thought patterns in the formulation of African Christian theology; in the organization of African Christian worship; and in the design and management of the structure of ministry and authority in the African Christian church. Hence, it is indeed an onerous task and challenge for African theologians across the continent. Pope Paul VI in 1969 reiterated this challenge when he said "you may, and you must have an African Christianity" (Mbefo 1989:5). However, taking up this challenge to indigenize or Africanize Christianity, demands a serious caution. The following therefore, should be taken into serious consideration in order to achieve a successful inculturation of Christianity in Africa.

The Evolutionary African Culture
The inculturation of Christian faith in Africa is very imperative. The Christian faith should be made indigenous and to develop from within the cultures of the people. The faith should be made a way of life of Africans in which their experiences are appealed to and aspirations met. In fact, the faith should be African.

However, while trying to make the Christian faith to respond to African cultures, it should be borne in mind that African cultures have evolved or changed significantly. This is worthy of note, because the whole exercise of inculturation revolves around the recognition of African cultural specificities in the propagation and practice of the Christian faith in the continent. The fact is that over decades, the African continent has experienced significant changes in patterns of relationship ranging from the family, through the community, to

the larger society. There have been significant changes in their political ideologies, economic focus, socio-cultural value systems and religious outlook. This change is occasioned by the incidences of colonialism, slavery, missionary activities, commercial relations with the Europeans, and ceaseless breakthroughs in science and technologies.

During the 19th century, the European powers – Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Germany attacked and carved out the continent into areas of influence and shared out African people under their empires. Thereafter, foreign cultures and world view were foisted on the respective African-European territories; and at the other side, were the European Missionaries who equated the African traditional religion with devilish worship, hence, "shrines were indiscriminately destroyed and idols were pulverized; and on their sacred precincts arose schools and hospitals" (Mbefo 1989:43). As the African identity alongside its core cultural values was being replaced and substituted with a foreign identity, these core cultural values were ruefully flushed "into vulnerable antiquity" (Mbefo 1989:40). These political and religious influences contributed largely in the historical evolution of African culture.

Therefore, it would be inaccurate to conclude that African cultures are closed systems, or unchanging. Culture as it is believed is dynamic, and African cultures are not exceptions. The pre-colonial Africa is greatly different from the post-colonial, modern or contemporary Africa in which science, technologies and digitalization is the order of the day. In this post-modern or contemporary era, the unification of the countries of the world is highly enhanced into a "global village" (i.e. globalization). Also, more interestingly, in a global village, cultural influences are spread across board. All these have largely contributed in the making of a 'new Africa'.

In carrying out the task of inculturation in Africa, therefore, it would be misleading to call for the recovery of African cultures in their pristine purity or the way it was being practiced by African fore-bearers before the colonial era. According to Mbefo (1989:25), "such a call is nothing less than a call for a cultural anabaptism… and fails to take in the dimension of process in all human affairs". Achebe (2012:60) has lamented that "there are people who do not realize that (the pre-colonial era) was a different world than the world of today, which is far more open." Buttressing this, Mbefo (1989:8) observed that:

> Our exposure to other influences have made of us cultural hybrids… we, present day Africans who have gone through Western curriculum of education and speak Western languages are Africans in a way different from our ancestors who were innocent of such influences were Africans. We are Westerners in a different way in which the Westerners who have not experienced African influences are Westerners. We, present day Africans are the products of two heritages; the one foreign, the other indigenous.

It should however be noted that the reference to "western curriculum of education" does not in its strict sense or literary refer to western education, as one may want to argue for those set of Africans who are yet to acquire western education. Instead, it refers to the general fact of the western-African contact and the cultural influence that ensued. However, the fact still remains that the contemporary Africans are significantly different from the pre-colonial Africans. For instance, unlike the days when the abode of traditional diviners, native doctors and herbalists looked crude with thatch roofs and so on; these days the abode of most of them are sheer synthesis of the old and the new. While some may be made or built with modern blocks and Zinc roof tops, others may be made with mod blocks and zinc roof tops. Yet, among their sacred materials are breakable bottles and other metallic objects that might be of western origin. All these, therefore, go to suggest that the task of inculturation in post-modern Africa should be engaged wisely. The stake holders should be cautious to avoid any attempt to resuscitate 'a dead and forgotten aspect of African culture', which may be obviously irrelevant to the contemporary African society. This is because, such move would be retrogressive. There are aspects of African cultural values that have been commensurably or symmetrically replaced with Christian cultural values with the same degree of satisfaction. This is due to the fact that "there is no Christian value that is not a human value expressed differently in another cultural milieu" (Shorter 1973:66).

An example is seen in the role of the African diviners and native doctors, which seem to be satisfactorily played by Christian prophets/prophetess and prayer or healing houses/ministries in Africa. Hence, the process of inculturation should be seen as a cultural dialogue of equal parties (Ezechi 2011). Both parties – African and Christianity should be seen as equal in the exchange of values for a better African Christianity. And at the same time, this exercise should be done in a way, to avoid losing the essence of the gospel of Christ which is to draw mankind in salvation unto Himself.

The Unity of the Church/Christendom

The unity of the church and Christendom has been very important to Christianity. Hence, Jesus prayed "Father, that they may be one" (John 17:11). It is the same desire that informed Ecumenical Movement in Christendom, which is aimed at the unification of all Christian denominations. This initiative dates back to the twentieth century and formed part of the issues discussed at the Second Vatican Council. According to Onwubiko

(1999:35):

> The twentieth century began with events that drew the attention of Christians of all denominations to the fact that Christian unity was a prerequisite for the mission of the church. Unity as it became clear to most Christians, has been indispensable for effectiveness in Christian mission.

Hence, the initiative was embraced by both the Catholic and Protestant churches though in variety of approaches. The word 'ecumenism' is derived from the Greek words "*oikoumēnē* (the inhabited world) and *oikos* (house) which literarily refer to the act of housing or accommodating the world Christian denominations separated by doctrine, history and practice, into one umbrella in purpose and mission. Efforts have, over the years, been put to achieving this, hence Ecumenism is to the Universal Christianity, what Inculturation is to African Christianity.

The task of inculturation in Africa, therefore, should not be engaged in a way to truncate the ecumenical initiative. This is important because inculturation in Africa covers wide and deep areas including doctrinal, theological, liturgical issues etc which are very sensitive and delicate parts of Christianity. In fact, it is doctrinal differences that largely explain the denominational proliferation in Christendom. Therefore, in order not to further severe the relationship, cooperation and unity among Christian denominations which is the core value of Ecumenism, adequate consultation of Christian stakeholders is recommended in the process of inculturation exercise in Africa.

Christian ecological concern

The phenomenon of climate change alongside its devastating effects has over decades been of great concern to world leaders, international Agencies, organizations and individuals. This ecological concern has also been taken seriously by Christians or the Christian community world over. This Christian ecological concern could be said to have been triggered by several accusations and indictments which have blamed Religion and Christianity in particular, especially as practiced by the West, for the current state of the global climate. For instance, Nasr (1967) observed that the ecological crisis is fundamentally a crisis of values, and that religion being the primary source of values in any culture, are thus implicated in the decisions humans make regarding the environment. In the same vein, White (1971) in his *"Historical Root of our Ecological Crisis"* particularly blamed Christianity for the current ecological crisis, when he wrote that; "our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes towards man's relation to nature…. For nearly 2 millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature". While these may not be absolutely justifiable, these works succeeded in awakening ecological consciousness in Christendom. Hence, for decades, the preoccupation with ecological stewardship among Christian theologians has been quite pronounced as several eco-theological perspectives have been developed.

Beyond these however, the need for ecological justice and stewardship can hardly be overemphasized. In the process of inculturation in Africa, therefore, this ecological need should be given serious attention especially as the Continent bears the brunt of the devastating impact of climate change. African theologians and other stakeholders should in understanding that "creation is bound up with salvation" (De Grucy, 2004) reflect on the origin, purpose and destiny of the cosmos from the point of view of faith. African cultures are replete with values and belief systems that promote the integrity of the ecosystem. Some of these values include the sacredness of the earth, reverence for life and provision for generational continuity (CIWA, 2011). African theologians should therefore relive some of these eco-friendly values in the inculturation process without distorting the main essence of the gospel of Christ.

Conclusion

So far, this paper has discussed the concept of inculturation in a post-modern or contemporary Africa. It has not only analyzed the concept of inculturation, but also highlighted the challenge before African theologians in search of African Christianity. Three silent issues – the Evolutionary African Culture, the Unity of Christendom (Ecumenism) and the Christian ecological concern, were advanced as indispensable issues which those involved in the process of inculturation in Africa would not take for granted, in order to achieve a satisfactory home-made Christian faith in the continent.

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