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(97) History of African Ecumenism and Inter-Church Co-operation

James Amanze

Introduction

This chapter gives an account of how the ecumenical movement began in Africa from 1900 to the present day. It argues that the missionary factor was the bedrock of ecumenism as a result of the conflict that emerged among the missionary bodies and the need to achieve co-operation and unity among them for the advancement of the gospel in Africa. It discusses the various ecumenical initiatives that were carried out by churches in Africa which culminated in the creation of national Christian councils and various regional ecumenical bodies which have been instrumental in fostering unity among the Christian churches and people of other faiths. The chapter also examines the various achievements that the ecumenical movement has made in Africa, the challenges that it faces today, and it looks into the future of African ecumenism.

The Missionary Factor as the Bedrock of Ecumenism

Africa is a home to numerous religions, which today compete with one another for membership. The religions that make headlines are Christianity and Islam but, over and above these, there are other religions such as Hinduism, Bahai, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism and, in recent years, there is a great deal of talk about Satanism. Underlying all these religions are African Traditional Religions which are considered as the indigenous religions of Africa whose presence goes back to time immemorial. The relationship between these religions has over the centuries been one of conflict rather than co-operation. The nineteenth century was a great period of Christian expansion in Africa whereby a number of missionary societies under the inspiration of their mother churches overseas planted churches practically everywhere on the continent. The dilemma, however, is that the church came to Africa already divided into different denominations, bearing labels such as Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostal, Charismatic, and then African Independent Churches. Colonialism exacerbated these divisions and made the life of the African people unbearable. This is the context in which the ecumenical movement was born across Africa.

Gabriel Setiloane, in 'The ecumenical movement in Africa: From mission to moratorium', has noted that the ecumenical movement and co-operation in Africa has its roots in the missionary factor. According to Setiloane, at the beginning of the missionary era there was mutual assistance among the missionaries born out of solidarity in the face of a strange and unfriendly environment. Writing about missionary work in Southern Africa, Setiloane has noted that it was customary for missionaries, of whatever nationality, who went north of the Orange River to make their way first to Kuruman where Robert Moffat of the London Missionary Society was based in order to receive guidance as to which of the tribes would accept them and their services.[1] This seems to have been the case in a number of African countries.

Unfortunately, with the passing of time, this co-operation turned into conflict as the missionaries competed for converts and engaged in 'empire-building'. These conflicts led to divisions in the mission field not only among the missionaries themselves but also among their converts. In some instances, such

[1] Gabriel Setiloane, 'The Ecumenical Movement in Africa: From Mission Church to Moratorium', in *Resistance and Hope: South African Essays in Honour of Beyers Naudé,* eds. Charles Villa-Vicencio and John de Gruchy. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 137.

conflicts led to open war between Christian communities, as was the case in Uganda where Anglicans and Roman Catholics fought running battles at Namirembe, Kampala, at the beginning of the missionary work there.[2] Interestingly, it was these missiological conflicts among Christian denominations that created the need for ecumenical dialogue. Thus mission and ecumenism are two sides of the same coin. Soon the missionaries realised that, if *Missio Dei* were to succeed in Africa, it required reconciliation, unity and co-operation among its bearers. Andrew R. H. Thompson, in 'Communities of the Spirit: The Missiology of Roland Allen in the Twenty-first Century', has noted that one of the most fundamental points of *Missio Dei* is that the witnessing community should display values of reconciliation, peacefulness and egalitarianism in the midst of a world that undermined or rejected those values. This is because the mission of the church is the proclamation of God's reconciling mission in the lives of people and communities everywhere. It takes place wherever the life and ministry of the church constitute a genuine testimony to the kind of reconciled, loving relationships that God desires for his creation.[3] It is in this respect that ecumenism cannot be conceived outside the mission of the church in Africa.

The Genesis of African Ecumenism and the Creation of National Christian Councils

Numerous essays and books have been written which chronicle the genesis of co-operation and unity in African Christianity, and yet it is important to refresh our memories here. Jamie Lynn Hollis, in 'Ecumenism: Moving towards multi-faceted global conversion', has noted that 'the word ecumenical not only means working across denominational divides… but also includes the concept of working together, united across other divides that exist in the global church… The visibly united church must, through the grace of God, work across and through not only denominations but also cultures, languages, contexts, political lines, economic divides, disciplines, strengths, weaknesses and quirks'.[4] In this regard, ecumenical co-operation and unity mean that the whole church is called to take the whole gospel to the whole world.[5]

It is important to note that, though historically the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement is traced back to the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, there had been other initiatives long before that date.[6] It has been noted above that the ecumenical movement was triggered by divisions occurring between missionaries and agencies working in the same neighbourhood, country and region from different denominational backgrounds. These divisions severely undermined the credibility of that which they wanted to witness, that is, the love of God in Christ for all humanity. Although such conflicts were addressed at the local, national and regional levels through comity agreements, it was still felt that there was a need for a global partnership in Christian mission.[7] It was this need that called for the holding of the Edinburgh Conference in 1910.

In *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa*,[8] the author has indicated that, in Africa as a whole, attempts to promote co-operation and unity in African Christianity predates the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, in which case it could be argued that the African continent was both the precursor and catalyst of ecumenical efforts initiated elsewhere. In this regard, African Christianity contributed significantly towards the efforts of uniting global Christianity. This is supported by events in the mission field in Africa

[2] James N. Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1998), 124-126, where the conflict between Roman Catholics and Anglicans in Uganda led to a civil war.
[3] Andrew R. H. Thompson, 'Communities of the Spirit: The Missiology of Roland Allen in the Twenty-first Century', in *Edinburgh 2010: Youth Perspectives,* ed. Kirk Sandvig (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2010), 16.
[4] Jamie Hollis, 'Ecumenism: Moving Toward a Multi-Faceted Global Conversation', in *Edinburgh 2010: Youth Perspectives*, ed. Kirk Sandvig (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2010), 88.
[5] Hollis, 'Ecumenism', 88.
[6] Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement ,* 154.
[7] Hollis, 'Ecumenism', 88.
[8] Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement,* where this has been discussed in detail.

for, at the very beginning of the twentieth century, attempts at church unity were under way in Malawi (1900), Congo (1902), South Africa (1904), Kenya (1908), Tanzania (1911), Nigeria (1911), Sierra Leone (1912) and Zambia (1914) to name but a few countries.[9] Later, the ecumenical movement accelerated under the inspiration of ecumenical institutions that were put in place as a result of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference such as the International Missionary Council, Life and Work, and Mission and Order. Their activities, which ultimately led to the formation of the World Council of Churches on 23rd August 1948, inspired African church leaders to form National Christian Councils that have become the backbone of the ecumenical movement in African Christianity today.

It appears that the African people have had no serious difficulties in embracing ecumenical co-operation compared with their counterparts in Europe and America. Setiloane has indicated that signs of ecumenical co-operation, tolerance, mutual acceptance and co-operation between churches are more evident in African than elsewhere in the world. In Africa, denominational barriers are criss-crossed with amazing ease, especially at the congregational level.[10] This is evidenced by the fact that in many southern African cities, towns and villages, churches have established fraternal organisations of ministers and pastors whose membership is open to all denominations. This enables different member churches to discuss practical issues affecting their lives and the opportunity to pray together for church unity during which pulpit exchange is also practised. According to Setiloane, this and other forces at work in the African soul continue to reduce the divided nature of the church as it came from abroad.[11] There are indications that the African people are easily able to relate with one another on ecumenical issues, especially at the grassroots level because of their philosophy of humanity variously known as *Ubuntu, umunthu* or *botho*. This is characterised by strong human ties. Human beings are not considered as islands but as a network of people bound together by their Master Creator. On this matter, D.G.S. M'Timkulu, cited by Setiloane, puts it succinctly:

> The social ties binding the African Christian to his extended family and clan have always been stronger than the forces of separation that arise from membership in different denominations. The important family occasions like births, marriages, funerals and clan festivals bring together in one place of worship relatives with different confessional backgrounds. On these occasions, they not only share in common acts of worship with gay disregard of denominational differences, but they also take part in symbolic acts of family and clan unity that have their roots in the traditional past.[12]

It will be seen from the above that the people of Africa are open to ecumenical co-operation despite the difficulties created by their mother churches in Europe and America. Various efforts made by the local churches to achieve church unity have quite often been aborted because of opposition from the mother churches because of the bitterness of separation that took place in ecclesiological circles as a result of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation.

Towards the Formation of Continent-wide Ecumenical Organisations

One of the most interesting aspects of African ecumenism is that, from its humble beginnings in the 1900s, it eventually lead to the formation of continent-wide ecumenical organisations that brought African ecumenism out of the closet to an international level, giving it not only a specific shape but also some impetus unprecedented in the history of Christianity in Africa. Chief among these are the All Africa

[9] Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement* .
[10] Setiloane, 'The Ecumenical Movement in Africa', 246.
[11] Setiloane, 'The Ecumenical Movement in Africa', 246.
[12] Setiloane, 'The Ecumenical Eovement in Africa', 147.

Conference of Churches (1963), the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM – 1966), the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), and the Organisation of African Independent Churches (OAICs – 1982).[13]

Yemba has indicated that the emergence of these pan-African ecumenical organizations changed the configuration of the ecumenical movement in order to meet the challenges the African world faces today.[14] Since space does not allow us to discuss all the pan-African ecumenical organisations noted above, this section of the chapter will focus on the role played by the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), which is a fellowship of 169 national churches in 39 African countries, enjoying a congregational membership of more than 120 million Christians.[15] The inauguration of the AACC on 20th April 1963 under the theme 'Freedom and unity in Christ' ushered in a new era in African ecumenism. At the time of its inception, there was a general euphoria that its formation signalled the end of an era characterized by denominationalism which was seen as a cancerous destroyer of genuine Christianity, and the beginning of an authentic African Christian era in which different denominations, and the different churches and missions established in Africa were coming to a close.[16] M'Timkulu described it as 'undoubtedly the single most historic event that has taken place within the life of the churches in Africa during the twentieth century'.[17]

The Achievements of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa

The original dream of the ecumenical movement in Africa was the quest for 'organic church unity'. To this end, various attempts were made by the churches in Southern, Central, East and West Africa to form a 'United Church of Africa'. However, such attempts ended in utter failure. It is true that in 1964 unity of some kind among the churches was achieved in Zambia between the Methodists, the Paris Evangelical Missionaries, the Baptists and the United Church of Canada Mission to the Copperbelt, which formed the 'United Church of Zambia', but such attempts proved unsuccessful in other parts of Africa because of resistance from mother churches.[18] At present, this dream seems unattainable since many churches seem to be going back to denominationalism in order to protect their identity and ensure their survival.

Having said this, it should however be noted that not everything has been lost. It has been observed, for example, that over the years the church in Africa has acted as a 'watchman' in the midst of the nations, prophetically witnessing to the divine demands for truth, justice, peace and fighting to end all forms of oppression, discrimination, injustice and corruption.[19] In this regard, the ecumenical movement in Africa has played a crucial role in the development of the African people spiritually, politically, economically and culturally. At the time of the inauguration of the AACC, the theme of the first Assembly was similar to that adopted later in the same year by the Organisation of African Unity (now the African Union) which was 'Unity and Freedom'. What was even more interesting is that, at the same time, the first Pan-African Youth Conference held its meeting under the theme 'Freedom under the Cross'. These themes were not a mere coincidence but they encapsulated in a strategic way the agenda and vision of the churches and the

[13] https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/faith-and-order (accessed 21 May, 2014).
[14] https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/faith-and-order (accessed 21 May, 2014).
[15] Nicolas Otieno. *For a New Africa: With Hope and Dignity* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 7.
[16] Jesse .N. K. Mugambi, 'Some lessons from a century of Ecumenism in Africa', in *Visions of Authenticity: The Assemblies of the All Africa Conference of Churches 1963-1992,* ed. Efiong Utuk, (Nairobi: AACC, 1997), 31.
[17] Andrea Karamaga, 'General Secretary's Report to the 10th General Assembly', Kampala, 4th June 2013, 12.
[18] Setiloane, 'The Ecumenical Movement in Africa', 146.
[19] Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, *An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 244.

continent as a whole. They were aimed at uniting and liberating the continent of Africa from the thrall of colonialism. Such ecumenical action led to the liberation of most African countries.[20]

One of the most tangible examples of how the ecumenical movement contributed towards the liberation of the African people was the fight against apartheid in South Africa. Agnes Abuom, in 'Africa and the ecumenical movement', has noted that one of the achievements of the ecumenical movement in Africa was indeed the fall of apartheid in South Africa. According to Abuom, the establishment by the WCC of its Programme to Combat Racism in South Africa helped the world to see the oppression of Africa with new eyes and named apartheid for what it was. She writes:

> The moral and ethical claims of solidarity were not just informed by the human rights regime but by the naming of apartheid as a sin against God and humanity. Nelson Mandela affirmed this theological thinking during his profound message to the World Council of Churches Assembly held in Harare in December 1998.[21]

Abuom has noted that freedom and independence in South Africa was, in part, the result of the acts of solidarity between the global moral community and the local ecumenical movement.[22] In this regard, in the context of South Africa, one of the achievements of the ecumenical movement was the Kairos Document which was written by an ecumenical group of theologians at the height of apartheid in 1985. The document argued that the moment of truth (*kairos*) had come when the churches were challenged by God to take a decisive action to liberate its people. What it is important to note is that the document generated a great deal of discussion and excitement not only in South Africa but also in other parts of the world. It assisted the oppressed South African community to fight for its freedom by arguing that true reconciliation and genuine peace cannot be achieved without justice.[23]

The ecumenical movement in Africa has also been concerned with issues of peace and has thus been involved in peace-making processes. Karamaga has observed that the African context has always been characterised by volatility, going back to colonial times and the movement for independence that followed. Of particular interest in this regard were the struggles for self-determination in many parts of Africa. But even after independence, a number of African countries faced internal upheavals that required political action to achieve peace. As a result, issues of conflict resolution have been at the top of the ecumenical movement's agenda. For example, since its formation, the AACC has been engaged in promoting peace in Africa which has been recognised even by non-Christian organisations. A good example was the request that was made by the government of the Sudan, asking the AACC to facilitate negotiations with the freedom fighters in the South that culminated in the signing of the peace agreement in 1972 which allowed Sudan to enjoy peace for eight years before war broke again. According to Karamaga, the AACC ministry of mediation and peace-making has been experienced in all parts of Africa throughout its fifty years of existence.[24] Peace-making interventions in places where there has been political conflict in Africa have also been made by National Christian Councils.[25]

One of the issues that has bedevilled the people of Africa is poverty. It is considered one of the factors that has hampered the economic growth and development of Africa. The majority of the African people

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[20] All Africa Conference of Churches: Message of the Golden Jubilee Assembly, Kampala, Uganda, 3rd-9th June 2013, 1.

[21] Agnes Abuom. 'Africa and the Ecumenical Movement.' In *For a New Africa: With Hope and Dignity*, ed. Nicholas Otieno, (Geneva: WCC, 2004), 20.

[22] Abuom, 'Africa and the Ecumenical Movement', 21.

[23] Kinnamon and Cope, *An Anthology*, 245.

[24] Karamaga, 'General Secretary's Report', 22.

[25] For example, the Botswana Council of Churches' intervention and peace-making efforts when conflict broke out between Botswana and Namibia over Sedudu Island. See James N. Amanze, *Ecumenism in Botswana: The story of the Botswana Christian Council* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 2006).

live in absolute poverty. As recently as 2009, out of 24 nations identified as having low human development, 22 of them were said to be in Africa. Valentine Mokiwa, at the 10th General Assembly of the AACC which was held in Kampala in June 2013, described the situation as 'disheartening, paining, shameful and unbecoming'.[26] The ecumenical movement in Africa has addressed this problem by opting to take action on behalf of the poor. During the 10th General Assembly, Mokiwa conscientised the people by saying that 'the church cannot stay indifferent on this matter. The church must decide to take sides with those whose rights are stolen, the underprivileged and the oppressed'.[27] In this regard, a number of National Christian Councils and other ecumenical organisations, throughout the ecumenical movement, have taken initiatives to uplift the life of the poor by using different strategies aimed at the eradication of poverty.

With this in mind, the ecumenical movement in the 21st century has focused on supporting African debt campaign initiatives such as Africa Jubilee 2000. National campaigns against debt and structural adjustment programmes culminated into a pan-African consultation in Dakar, Senegal, in December 2000. This consultation came up with a declaration entitled 'Africa: From resistance to alternatives'. It advocated a total and unconditional cancellation of all African debt. This demand was based on the undisputed economic, social, moral, legal and historical arguments that the debt was fundamentally a human, social and political problem and not a financial or technical issue, as the World Bank and the IMF attempted to demonstrate.[28]

Mention should also be made here of the ecumenical efforts in Africa to fight against HIV and AIDS. This pandemic has been considered by the ecumenical movement as one of the most horrifying forms of violence on the African continent. In this vein, throughout the HIV and AIDS pandemic period, ecumenical organisations, in co-operation with the WCC, equipped and accompanied the African churches in their struggle against this scourge. The WCC, for one, facilitated a number of initiatives in different churches and institutions which helped them to educate the masses regarding the cause of HIV and AIDS and how to prevent the condition since there was no cure. Armed with this knowledge and with the help of anti-retroviral drugs, a number of people in Africa today have managed to prolong their lives.

Theologically**,** the ecumenical movement spearheaded by the AACC has taken seriously the issue of peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims on the continent. Interfaith dialogue between these two faiths has been tackled earnestly in recent years in close collaboration with the programme for Christian-Muslim relations in Africa (PROCUMURA).29

Challenges Facing African Ecumenism Today

Despite the fact that many gains have been made by the ecumenical movement in the spiritual, social, economic and political spheres, there are still a number of challenges that people in Africa face today. Such challenges have been succinctly captured by the message of the Golden Jubilee Assembly in Kampala in the following words:

> We still have situations of poor governance, some countries still have bad and autocratic leadership, corruption is still a major obstacle to development in some African countries, there is misuse of state resources by some leadership at the expense of the poor, religious conflicts, resource-based wars fanned by outside powers but promoted by greedy local leaders, the unethical and indiscriminate extraction of natural resources such as crude

[26] Address of the Most Rev. Valentine Mokiwa at the 10th General Assembly, Kampala, Uganda, 4th June 2013, 3.
[27] Address of the Most Rev. Valentine Mokiwa, 4.
[28] www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/africa/index-e.html (accessed 9 June, 2014).
[29] Karamaga, 'General Secretary's Report', 19.

> oil, minerals, timber… by multinational companies without real benefit to the citizens… the brain drain, xenophobia, homophobia, Afrophobia, climate injustice, food insecurity and many more.[30]

In addition to the challenges noted above, Yembahas observed that there was a degree of ecumenical lethargy in the churches of Africa, often because people were preoccupied with their own individual concerns rather than institutional survival and identity. Each church is defensive about its own identity.[31] This legacy, inherited from the colonial period, has kept countries and peoples of the former colonies bound to the countries and peoples of their respective civilpowers. This has become a serious obstacle towards achieving genuine ecumenism. It is important to note that many church denominations in Africa today tend to identify themselves with three commonwealth bodies: the anglophone, francophone and lusophone. The implication of this is that, since many Christian denominations are affiliated to these bodies, such an affiliation is an obstacle to the evolution of authentic African expressions of Christianity among the churches for fear that to deviate from the norms of their mother churches overseas will lead to reprisals and reprimands.[32] It has been observed though that while, in cultural and practical experience, African Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists and others have more in common with each other than with their counterparts in Europe and North America, the patterns of economic relationships that they have with them make it difficult for African ecumenism to evolve across confessional lines.[33]

Looking into the Future

The ecumenical movement in Africa has not only been looking into the past in order to correct the wrongs created by colonialism, ethnicity and other negative influences affecting African societies, but it has also been looking into the future. In this regard, reference should also be made to the ecumenical activities of the AACC as the epitome of African ecumenism. During the Golden Jubilee in Kampala in June 2013, the AACC pledged to continue fostering actions in collaboration with the African Union for the attainment of a continent which is more solidly integrated economically, politically and spiritually by committing itself to the preservation and maintenance of God's creation. As a forward-looking ecumenical organisation, the AACC pledged and committed itself to promote and consolidate ecumenical action in three areas, namely: (a) protecting human life by ensuring that no life is lost through war, hunger, disease and poor facilities for expectant mothers; (b) promotion and enhancement of human life by ensuring holistic growth for everyone by emphasising education, good living conditions, proper shelter and all that promotes abundant life for all; and finally (c) helping the African people to celebrate the fact that the centre of gravity of Christianity has shifted from the northern hemisphere to the southern, something that requires new theological reflection – in order to dispel ignorance, heretical teachings, and the proliferation of schisms within the body of Christ – and theological education that is Christocentric and pragmatic, informed by and expressed in African life and thought.[34]

As part of its efforts to prepare for the future, the ecumenical movement, of which the AACC is the most visible and representative ecumenical institution on the continent, saw the need to prepare the leadership of the growing church. To this end, the AACC has in recent years devoted time and space to equipping young theologians on the continent with leadership skills and theological knowledge. This led to the creation of the Theological Institute by the Theological Department of the AACC. Such institutes

[30] All Africa Conference of Churches: Message of the Golden Jubilee Assembly, 1.
[31] https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order (accessed 21 May, 2014).
[32] Mugambi, 'Some lessons from a century of Ecumenism ', 18.
[33] Mugambi, 'Some lessons from a century of Ecumenism ', 18.
[34] All Africa Conference of Churches: Message of the Golden Jubilee Assembly, 2-3.

prepare young theologians for future leadership on the continent. Two such institutes were held in Maputo, Mozambique, in 2008 and Kampala, Uganda, in June 2013.

At the same time, in recent years the AACC decided to revitalise the network of theological associations in each sub-region namely: ATISCA, ATIEA, WAATI and ASTHEOL. This led to the foundation of the All Africa Academy of Theology and Religious Studies (AAATRS) in Nairobi in December 2012.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the ecumenical movement in Africa from the beginning of the 1900s to the present day. The religious background which gave rise to the ecumenical movement has been discussed. It has been noted that the ecumenical movement was a result of the conflicts that emerged in the mission field. Various attempts made by Africans to foster and enhance the ecumenical spirit have been discussed. The achievements that the ecumenical movement has brought to Africa have been noted. We conclude by noting that the ecumenical movement has been faced with a number of challenges that have prevented it from achieving organic church unity as the ultimate goal. Attempts have also been made to look into the future.

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