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(115) The Future and Challenges of African Ecumenism

André Karamaga

Introduction

The Christian faith is, and remains, contagious in such a way that those who adhere to it adapt it and integrate it into their context, but they cannot really live according to it and enjoy it without transmitting it to others. It is this imperative of transmitting the faith received and contextualized in conjunction with socio-cultural dynamics that we call Christian mission.

Considered up to now as a mission field, Africa has a major challenge in re-examining its responsibility vis-à-vis the Universal Church of Christ which is deepening its roots on the continent.

The Church in Africa, for which we need to explore the way it could be one, according to Jesus' prayer, has a special profile which has never existed anywhere else. In some African countries, the number of denominations is estimated to be more than 5,000.

It is also worth mentioning that the church (or churches) which considers itself as invested of the mission to change situations is not immune from the influence and conditioning of that same situation. Obviously, whether it is in Africa or elsewhere, this responsibility of making sure the Church of Christ develops and has a future primarily rests on Christian men and women, and specifically on those of them who are at various levels of responsibility in the church. Indeed, they must remain aware of the fact that we belong to the church and that this Church that we consider ours and wrongly refer to as 'our Church', doesn't belong to us at all. The Church belongs to Christ, its head and its Lord who, because of his grace and his infinite love, has associated us with his ministry of shepherd and preacher of the gospel of salvation. Consequently, any church leader, at whatever level, has to take their responsibility seriously, not only out of respect for Christ, but also because of the ministry (service) and the mandate we have voluntarily subscribed to in response to our vocation (calling).

We will then try in the following pages to understand the dynamics and the basis of our responsibility, oriented towards a better future based on values of the gospel which, once they are rooted in our cultural universe, can only generate hope and dignity.

The African Church is not an entity separate from the Universal Church. One of its main responsibilities, which we will try to understand, is to contribute to life, to the testimony and the credibility of the Universal Church, which is the body of Christ, the African Church is organically and spiritually part and parcel of it.

The Chances of the African Church

How can we then refer to the ethical implications of spirituality, which undoubtedly are now part and parcel, not only of the life but also of the survival of African populations, without letting comparison about the shortcomings block us, as if our failure could justify another?

Moreover, when there is an effort to situate the church in Africa in the context of the global Church, one realizes that the roots of the African Church can be traced back to the period before Christianity. For instance, how can the fact that the Israelites spent more than four hundred years in the African continent at a period where material and cultural exchanges among different regions of the continent were frequent, not be taken into account? Can the reality of these exchanges between the African peoples and the Israelites

explain the fact that there are striking similarities between African monotheism and the biblical one? I will come back to such concerns later on.

In any case, the stay of the Israelites in Africa is not an episodic detail, since it is associated with the founding of the Israelites through the hospitality granted to Joseph when he was sold as a slave. This successful reception and integration culminated in his promotion to the rank of Prime Minister (Gen. 41:37-49). Indeed, if the benediction and reconciliation which occurred in Africa between the sons of Jacob did not take place, it would have been impossible, later on, to talk about the Israelites as a people and as a nation.

In the year 721 BC, when Samaria, the capital of Israel, was conquered by the Assyrians, and later, in 587 BC, Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, by the Babylonians, the Israelites were scattered not only in Europe, but also in Northern Africa[1]

Young person Schaaf and Kwame Bediako (1994) have indicated that during the four centuries before Jesus-Christ, the Jews settled in the whole of the Near East, in Egypt, in Northern Africa, in Sudan up to Ethiopia.'[2] Let us also underline the fact that the Old Testament, the whole of the holy books of the Israelites which later became the Holy Scriptures for Christians, was translated from Hebrew into Greek in Alexandria, in Egypt, during the third century BC as the first missionary translation of the Bible called 'the Septuagint'.

Moreover, according to the story recounting what happened on the day of Pentecost, Africans were also present at this crucial time of what the history of the church considers as the birthday of the church (Acts 2:9-11). The story of the Ethiopian eunuch, baptized by Philip (Acts 8: 26-40), and that of Simon of Cyrene, known for having carried Jesus' cross (Mark 15:21) are proof of the presence of Africa at the beginning of Christianity. The rapid expansion of the faith which conquered the north of Africa up to Ethiopia, producing such eminent theologians as Tertullian and St Augustine, are well stated by historians. Indeed, in the fourth century AD, 20% of Christians during that time were Africans. It is well known that this rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa was seriously affected by the arrival of Islam in the seventh century AD.

The One God, the Basis of Unity

Some stories of the evangelization of Africa give the impression that God was imported into Africa by western missionaries. This impression is even stronger when African Christianity is considered as a new faith incarnated in an empty space which was waiting to be filled with a new, universal and timeless religion. This conception is not only misleading, but is also insufficiently informed about Africa and Christianity. For, on one hand, Africa and its inhabitants should not be considered as empty vessel that some foreigners came to fill, without foundations or references to their spiritual experience. On the other hand, the Christian faith is neither a set of doctrines that are out of time, nor an experience of life that can be handed out of a specific geographical or socio-historic context.

After a long debate carried on during the twentieth century, often based on lack of information and sometimes on prejudice, there are two aspects of the truth of traditional religion that we can consider as obvious: on one hand, there is the belief in one transcendent God that can be found in every corner of the African continent. This belief which is experienced and carried by successive generations since the mists of time, is confirmed by the existence in each African language of a name used to refer to God, with

[1] John Stevenson, *A Survey of the Old Testament: The Bible Jesus Used* (Hollywood, CA: Redeemer Publishing: 2008).
[2] Ype Schaaf and Kwame Bediako. *On their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1994).

connotations which give an idea of the conception people have of him. This fact shows the striking similarities between monotheistic Judaism and Christianity.

Thus, it is not possible to recognize the reality of monotheism in the African spiritual landscape and still refer to the African Traditional Religion as 'animism'. Let us be reminded that this expression 'animism' was introduced by Edward Tylor who was trying to describe Mexican beliefs which, according to him, were reduced to the submission of the diffuse forces which govern the universe.[3]

If we take as our starting-point the view that the debate over the recognition of African monotheism is closed, a debate which, in other respects, was linked with the way Africans were implicitly viewed, we can affirm that this monotheism constitutes an extraordinary opportunity for the church in Africa.

Whether it is today or in the past, when people speak about God, they don't always realize that they are referring to the Supreme Being who preceded us, not only in time and space, but also as existing within the African people they are talking about. As for Africa, people go to the extent of expressing their impatience in continually hearing speeches from those who try to convince them of the existence of God, while they already believe in this God. Evangelization in Africa does not consist in proving the existence of God, but by showing the signs and the tangible manifestations of God's presence. And according to the message transmitted by Jesus Christ to the disciples of John the Baptist when they came to confirm if he was really the one sent from God; Jesus underlined the fact that, when God is in a nation, things change and victory of life over death becomes a reality (Matt. 11:1-6).

More importantly, faith in the one transcendent God is shared not only by Christians and aspects of some African Traditional Religions, but also with Muslims. And this is not a detail of no importance, since the demarcation line between these three forms of faith which conquered African spirituality is largely unclear.

Indeed, at both demographic and geographic levels, the co-existence of the aspects of these three faiths is a striking reality. For instance, it is not a rare occurrence to find Christians, Muslims and aspects of traditional religion living together in the same family and sharing in their daily life.

Is not this belief in one God shared by the majority of Africans really an opportunity which can serve as the basis of peace, harmony and strong unity?

In order to seize this opportunity, all African Christians and Muslims must broaden their vision beyond Africa in order to help the world abandon its present tendency of seeking to transform religion into an ideology and changing it into an instrument of hatred and violence.

The Church Inherited by Africa

Those who look at statistics and numerical progression indicators say that Africa is increasingly becoming the new cradle of world Christianity.[4]

We can highlight a number of dynamics which seem to determine the configuration of situations on this continent whose populations have been considered as 'incurably religious', an expression introduced by the Kenyan theologian, John Mbiti.[5]

African Christianity is characterized by diversity of expression and of ecclesial organization which have never been observed anywhere else. There are, on the one hand, the various congregations of the Catholic Church and those of the Orthodox family and, on the other hand, the Protestant variety of churches.

First, Christianity in Africa is diverse because of the various origins of its denominations. For example, in the same country, a Baptist church from America has a different ecclesial organization from a Baptist

[3] (Sir) Edward Burnet Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (two vols), (London: John Murray, 1871).
[4] See Lamin Sanneh and Joel A. Carpenter (eds.), *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World* (Oxford: OUP, 2005).
[5] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).

church of Scandinavian origin. Thus, in a given country, it is not rare to find four or five churches of the same confession operating as administratively different entities from each another.

But the diversity in African Christianity is determined not only by geographical origins. It is even more obviously seen in churches referred to as 'independent', founded by African preachers which, for the most part and for various reasons, are different from the denominations founded by foreign missionaries.

Nevertheless, schematically, African Christianity can be classified under four categories depending on the origin and the history of the tendencies which form it:

1. The first category is made up of denominations which were imported into the continent by former slaves which were liberated and brought back to some of the coastal countries of West Africa. During their stay in the countries where they were taken as slaves, several Africans turned to Anglicanism, Methodism or Presbyterianism. When they came back to the continent, these Africans founded Anglican, Methodist or Presbyterian churches, which today are mainly active in Sierra Leone, the Gambia and Liberia.
2. The second category is made up of denominations which are the result of missionary work from the eighteenth century, including the Catholic Church working closely with the Orthodox Church.
3. The third category is composed of churches referred to as indigenous (independent), working together through the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), with its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya.
4. The fourth category is that of Pentecostal ecclesial communities whose number is steadily increasing in a spectacular way. These churches, which call themselves Evangelical, also have an alliance which gathers them together and which has its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya.

There is no clear demarcation between these four categories. A lot of Africans find it strange to make a distinction between Christians called ecumenical and others called evangelical! Should the true Christian not be both ecumenical and evangelical?

The Challenge of New 'Christian' Denominations

If we have decided to dedicate a separate section to these new groups which identify themselves as 'churches', it doesn't mean that we refuse to recognize them as such, as part of African Christianity. We don't have the right to judge or harbour a prejudice about the viability or the inadequacy of this or that community which claims the identity or the status of church. But the real question to ask is what would be the attitude to adopt vis-à-vis a new religious movement which emerges in this or that context. Such a question is not new. The Christian memory keeps vivid the story of the wisdom of Gamaliel concerning the new Christian groups after the launch of the Christian movement.

'Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do with these men. Some time ago, Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose and activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.' (Acts 5: 35-39).

Currently, spiritual groups of all varieties, whose number goes beyond understanding, have emerged and claim to be churches. In Angola, for example, there are more than 800 groups which have requested to be recognized as churches with a legal entity.

In his book, 'Le Saint-Esprit interroge les esprits' (The Holy Spirit is Interrogating the Spirits), Masamba Ma Mpolo recounts how this kind of movement is experienced in DRC and specifically in its capital Kinshasa where, he argues, gatherings and prayer groups – organized in homes, bars and drinking

dens, in streets and public markets – are swarming, and where preacher-evangelists are even setting themselves up in buses.[6] Many people wonder how to react to this phenomenon which follows the rule of the free market of everything, including illusion.

Where are We Coming from?

The fact that, in most cases, missionaries had forbidden the integration of African cultural elements in Christian liturgy and in the life of the church, had created a reaction after African churches gained their autonomy. Mission were put on the same level as colonization, until people forgot the eminent role played by some missionaries in the endorsement of African languages and in the fight against illiteracy.

This reaction differed depending on where the situation was observed and analyzed, whether it was in local communities or places of reflection such as theological institutions.

It was also the period where theological students started writing their papers on the value of traditional structures of the group of origin (for example, the notion of God amongst different groups of people, the role of initiation, and comparison between marriage in a given ethnic group and in the Bible, etc.).

In theological conferences, themes such as polygamy, funeral rites and even traditional religion as a coherent set of beliefs, have been studied seriously and sometimes in an openly 'apologetic' way in their favour. There is, nevertheless, this striking fact: nobody dare translate these reflections in conferences and in theological training institutes with a clear desire to endorse African culture into specific decisions to integrate this or that element considered as positive in the structured life of the church.

Even deeper, in theological faculties as well as in various conferences and seminars, reflections on the enculturation of the gospel reached conclusions which maybe could explain the hesitation of Africans to introduce their cultural values into the liturgy and the life of the church. Indeed, from the moment when African cultures ceased to be seen as primitive, people realized that these cultures served as support and source of the life that our ancestors managed to maintain and transmit to successive generations from time immemorial. But people also understood that religion is the pivot of culture, and we cannot define culture without taking into account its religious dimension.

For Africa, traditional religions wrongly considered as 'animism', proved to be a coherent monotheism which presented striking similarities with the monotheism of the Bible. Even though this was an uplifting discovery, it came as a major blow to the 'enculturation approach' of the gospel we mentioned briefly above. The main issue was how to integrate this or that African value into the life of the church without falling into the trap of syncretism, which was considered by some missionaries as the worst of sins, because it is true that every element and every cultural value undoubtedly has a religious dimension. It is because of this fear of syncretism that the church of Africa has continued welcoming and receiving inspiration from people and communities imbued with cultural values and elements, which it has not dared integrate into its life. Everybody knows the consequence of this confusion that we may consider to be the worst type of syncretism. On the one hand, there is the risk of having Christians who are living a double life: they celebrate in church, but they use African approaches to solve the problems of daily life. On the other hand, there is the risk of having individuals and communities who choose to continue considering their cultural origins negatively, a situation that becomes a tragic battle, denying oneself. An African proverb says that a person can run away from something that is running after them, but nobody can run away from what is inside them.

The choice – or rather, the fear – of going to the limit of the enculturation process of the gospel in Africa for fear of syncretism hides another reality: we forget that the model of Christianity that we

[6] Masamba, Ma Mpolo, Jean, *Le Saint-Esprit interroge les esprits: Essai de relecture et pistes psycho-pastorales de la spiritualité en Afrique: Cas de la République démocratique du Congo* (Cameroun: Éditions Clé, 2002).

internalized is undoubtedly a syncretistic one. Nevertheless, if this enculturation process of the gospel in Africa somehow lost momentum, the journey never ended. The present question is to ask ourselves where we are at this time in our journey towards church unity.

Where Are We?

The question about where we are in the enculturation process of the gospel in Africa has to be preceded by two admissions:

- The first one is to recognize that the church became implanted in Africa and it has become an undoubted reality in spite of its defying complexity.
- The second one is to recognize that Africa, which is progressively becoming the main pillar of world Christianity, will certainly put its mark on this the faith which is in the process of configuration, one way or another. The generations which are going to follow therefore have a huge responsibility, especially our generation which has witnessed radical changes.

After these two admissions, allow me to ask the questions I have been asking myself since I started reflecting on the enculturation process of the gospel in Africa:

1. Have there been in other places and at other times of the history of the church concerns similar to the ones we are having about the enculturation of the gospel in any given context? For example, who were the theologians who accompanied the missionary work of Paul (apart from Paul himself) to implant the gospel in the cultures of the peoples that this apostle evangelized?
2. Do we have the right to call into question the fact that our respective churches which are present and active, even in the midst of our tragedies, are not yet really African?
3. Do our churches really feel the value of the efforts and strategies that we invest in, in order to implant the gospel message in our cultures?

These questions become even more complicated when we realize that the expression ‘enculturation’ has become a synonym for ‘incarnation’. Enculturation is not different from the incarnation of Christ at the centre of our realities. If such is the case, would it be legitimate to pretend to incarnate Christ and his gospel, while the initiative is God’s in his total Sovereignty?

We have here fundamental questions that we bring back to the table, but not for aggravating the loss of momentum of the enculturation process, which will determine the future of ecumenism in Africa.

It is in the depth of this battle that God and his gospel come to meet us and, just as Jacob did, we would not let him go until he blesses us.

Where Are We Heading?

We have just positioned ourselves and we didn’t have the time to position our churches vis-à-vis the battle between life and death for the survival and the dignity of our countries and our continent. Any African entity, and especially any church, which takes the promise of the gospel to give life in abundance to every human being seriously, does not have the right to overlook the seriousness of the battle between life and death that our populations are facing. We can no longer continue managing the contradiction between the ‘life in abundance’ promised by the gospel and the abundance of misery which is killing our people in a continent which has now become the cradle of today’s Christianity.

Considering the seriousness of the situation, our cultural references themselves lose their viability and their raison d’être. Can we really celebrate God joyfully when our children have come to the point of taking the risk to be thrown into oceans while trying to run away from their continent? What cultural value is there behind the desperate action of a mother who kills her child in order to fill her body with a certain amount of drugs that she expects to sell once she reaches the other side of the sea? We are therefore at the

forefront of this battle, and this is where the gospel meets us to help us resist the multiple forces of death which threaten us.

The light brought by Jesus in the enculturation process of the gospel in our context consists of starting at the points of reference which have guided our ancestors and our contemporaries to live together. For instance, Jesus would tell Africans, 'Your ancestors told you that it is strictly inconceivable to kill a woman, even in time of war, because a woman is the bearer of life and fertility, as for me, I tell you, not only that you should not kill a woman, but also that the sacredness of life and the integrity of creation must be respected'. Drawing from this message with faith and conviction, the African Church can definitely solve the sufferings imposed on women in war and acts of genocide which put our dignity to shame.

Ecumenism – or the Imperative of Unity

The unity of the church is not an option to take or to leave. It is a non-negotiable imperative tightly linked with the vocation and the essence of the church in remaining faithful to its Lord.

> 'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17:20-21).

A cry from the heart, a wish or a prayer? These words – considered as Jesus' in the gospel according to John – carry a message which goes beyond a purely organizational strategy given by a master who is about to release his students into society for them to implement what they have learnt. The one who is pouring out his heart before his father to magnify the imperative of unity, is also God, to whom all Christian prayer is addressed. We thus have here an interesting situation whereby the one who has the power to fulfil prayer emphasizes, in the form of a request, what he is ready to give, the basis of his intimate relationship with his father. This is therefore a choice whose weight and gravity go hand-in-hand with our faithfulness to Christ and to the mandate of unity that he is giving us to be witnesses of his kingdom of peace, love and justice in this divided world.

Having clarified this, let's come back to the situation in Africa in order to try to see if we can consider the fragmented landscape that our present Christianity offers. We are faced with the dilemma of a glass which is half-filled which some will see, negatively, as half-empty, while others will see, positively, as half-full! In other words, African Christianity offers an image with two contradicting faces.

An understandable pride

On the one hand, there is the image of a giant, when one looks at Christianity's exceptional numerical growth and its dynamism based both on its youth and the intensity of its strikingly vibrant spirituality. This image settles more and more into our subconscious to such an extent that it creates a certain pride and a feeling that we are now part of a spiritual movement which will influence, one way or the other, the future and the fate of Africa and world Christianity.

This pride is reinforced and even turns into joy and celebration when members of the Christian family trust us and give to any of us major responsibility.

Justifiable worries

The image of the giant applied to the African Church in the context of world Christianity can be based on relatively understandable considerations.

I even heard a preacher explain that the African Church is becoming more and more as though the parable of the mustard seed was being realized, the seed which a man took and planted in his field and which grew to become a big tree so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches (Matt. 13: 31).

These images are wonderfully encouraging as they counterbalance, in a way, the Afro-pessimism that many people experience today, including some Africans who have no hopeful points of reference.

But let us also take into account the fact that there are people who depart from these two optimistic images to take the reflection further and see things from a critical perspective.

It is true that the African Church has become numerically huge, such that we have the right to be proud and grateful for it. For many, it represents an inexhaustible reservoir of faith in life and of strength in the fight for survival. In that sense, it is comparable with that big tree that the weak lean on and from which they sing together, like the birds of the air which glorify the Lord in their own way, as the parable says.

But don't we have the right to twist the parable in order to demand from the big tree that it may produce fruit in abundance so that the birds do not have to sing on an empty stomach? In that case, we can be sure that the songs of praise and commitment to build love, peace and dignity as a sign of the kingdom of God in this world will take over the songs of flight to a faraway sky that our multiple youth choirs, throughout the continent, are singing.

Still, we have the duty to take into consideration people who consider our gigantic church to be a giant with clay feet! This type of worry is fundamentally based on the situation of fragmentation we mentioned above.

What is more frightening in the case of Africa is the confusion between ethnic groups and Christian denominations. If, just as we said, this is not specific to Africa, let's recognize that taking such a challenge with other fragilities linked with history can lead to unpredictable consequences.

In other words, since Africa has more than 2,600 ethnic groups and Christian denominations formed in many cases according to ethnic entities, how can we think of the unity of the church which is supposed to be a ferment of African unity and the unity of mankind? Let's quickly acknowledge that this question becomes more complicated with the emergence of multi-party systems, when it is possible to find a group which has its own language, its own denomination and its own political party!

Based on the previous considerations, will it still be possible to consider our multiple diversities so trapped and so entangled with one another as an opportunity for the church in Africa? I remain convinced about it for the following reasons:

Primarily, the church is neither a given denomination nor a local church, nor even the family setting, as Paul took the liberty of stating it:

> Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house (Rom. 16:3-5).

The church first and foremost consists of individuals so varied and diverse that. This in itself requires the need for harmony and understanding within such diversity. These individuals come from all ethnic and social categories, including children, young people, women, the sick, the poor, the rich, etc. Hence, the image of the church as a body is vital:

> The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we all given the one Spirit to drink (1 Cor. 12:12-13).

Conclusion

We can't find a better theology that is so clear and specific as the basis of management of the diversities of the multi-dimensional identities which are emerging today and which settle while opposing each other, be it in Africa or elsewhere. And it is in this perspective that we should base our approach and our strategies

on Christ and his Spirit in order to break egoisms and denominational barriers to liberate them from their imprisonment at the individual, ethnic or national level. And this is not actually something that is theoretical, since we have examples of churches in Africa which have taken the plunge.

New ecumenical vision for the church in Africa must be at the top of our ecclesiological agenda.

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