

INDIGENISATION OF CHRISTIANITY: A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO THE INTEGRATION OF AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE AMONG THE YORUBA.

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Abstract

For a very long time, after the incursion of the third phase of Christianity into the interior Africa, Africans advocate for the indigenised Christianity that bears the imprint made in Africa, incorporates values and promotes the traditions and culture of the people in the spread of the gospel. It is historically unfolded that the cultural slavery in which the Africans were pinned and hardline position of the missionaries, in respect of the condemnation of African cultural values marked the start of ecclesiastical and missiological crises that characterized the second half of the nineteenth century missionary activities in Nigeria most exclusively in the Yorubaland. Scholarship in recent times reveals that, indigenisation or Africanisation of Christianity hugely produces a religious synthesis that is intelligible to the African philosophy. The indigenous religious experience and expression is choreographed and attuned to, through historically and cosmologically ordained knowledge and sensibilities. This paper, therefore, attempts to re-examine the distinctiveness of indigenized Christianity with the view of promoting cultural values and systematic approach to the indigenisation of Christianity. It adopts historical method and recommends the integration of Christian spirituality and culture and Christianity that reflects the socio-cultural reality of the Africans.

Keywords: Christianity, Church, Indigenisation, Yorubaland, Indigenous people.

Indigenisation of Christianity

The adjective “indigenous”, stemmed from the indo-European and Latin compound word, ‘in + de + gena’, implying: ‘to beget’ or that which is “born from within” or “that which comes from”, or ‘innate’, “local in contrast to foreign”, ‘alien’ or ‘exotic’⁴⁶ Indigenisation of Christianity is the freedom of African Christians to be Christians on their terms and interpret their traditions or culture without inhibition.⁴⁶ This involves free expression of African Christianity, describes the Christianity that is free from Western cultural influence and leadership control and incorporates values and promotes the traditions and culture of the people in the spread of the gospel. With the free expression of African identity, Christianity, therefore, becomes thoroughly and deeply indigenised within the life globe of Africa. This step provides a systematic approach to the

integration of Christian spirituality and culture. When the needs of Africans are met culturally, spiritually and socially, indigenising Christianity becomes achievable. Significantly, Christianity can only be made relevant to Africans should African culture, traditions, philosophy, worldviews and acceptable practices that are in consonant with the Bible are put into a great consideration. All these vital attempts widen the scope and authenticity of indigenisation. Removing African cultural values from Christianity, Christianity becomes unindigenised.

Bolaji Idowu, a prominent indigenous mission guru argues the distinctiveness of the concept of indigenisation of Christianity and constricts it to the Church in Nigeria which to him is *sine-qua-non*. Idowu was peeved with the method Christianity was practised in Nigeria; he saw it as a transplantation of European cult into Nigeria under the names of Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Seventh-day Adventist, and Salvation Army and so on. Idowu's vivid stance is germane to this research in that it acknowledges the advocated cultural expression of the people in the demonstration of the Christian faith. Indigenous leadership, participation and influence in the spread of Christianity are one of the robust strategies of indigenising Christianity in a particular region that is free from any foreign interference. Indigenising Christianity connotes, involving the indigenous people in the propagation of the gospel, encouragement of indigenous languages in worship, reading and interpreting the Bible, preaching and singing hymns and choruses and deployment of other indigenous strategies of making Christianity appropriate to the people. Thus, indigenisation of Christianity accentuates indigenous leadership of the Church, integration and reflection of people's culture in the expression of the Christian faith, the use of indigenous language as a medium of preaching and worshipping God and African appropriate methods of propagation of the gospel which make Christianity acceptable to the people culturally and spiritually. Toyin Falola stands plainly on the definition of the concept as he relates its understanding to the Africans' control of the Churches in Nigeria. In his scholarly analysis conceives indigenisation as the ability of Nigerians to assert themselves, control their own Churches, and draw positive elements from traditional culture and practices. Many Churches have been formed by Nigerians trying to indigenise Christianity. In general, they see vision, heal the sick, exorcise, pray long and loudly, sing, drum, dance, and give very long sermons with a focus on enhancing the spirituality of Church members.⁴⁶ Indigenisation in this sense implies that the administrative and spiritual powers of the Church are vested in the hands of Africans with free insertion of cultural values into Christianity believed to meet the dire needs of Africans.

Effective indigenising shows that Africans remain an influential force in the implantation, expansion and control of the Church in Africa. Ruminating on its

process, the process of indigenisation has to be doubled edged: first, replacing foreign cultural resources and processes with their indigenous equivalents or at any rate giving the latter equal scope. Second, modifying or adapting foreign resources to suit indigenous requirements. These processes are evident in popular music and other forms of secular and religious expressions cultivated in contemporary contexts.⁴⁶ African Christianity should therefore, be enhanced through the integration and manifestation of valuable culture. Our understanding of the concept provides a prominence to inculturation which is of necessity in Christianity for a meaningful and practicable indigenisation among Africans. Some African clergies possessed indigenous features which promoted and Africanised Christianity but only few of them are acknowledged by scholars for their contributions.

Ayandele relates the understanding of indigenisation to imply acculturation and with acculturation comes a veritable tool of conversion, which from the historical experience of Christianity cannot be divorced from its eventual overcoming of the initial hurdles. In essence, Christianity had not appealed to the Nigerian ethos. It was the failure of Christianity to be deeply rooted in the people that “impelled educated Africans to study their religion in order to see how much features of indigenous worship could be granted the pure milk of the gospel”.⁴⁶ Ayandele unravels the objective of indigenisation which is to give expression to Christianity in African religio-cultural forms. For Christianity to be properly indigenised, it must develop within the African environment so as to obtain the characteristic forms and trappings of African spirituality. Ayandele further broadens our minds of the understanding of indigenisation when he says that the transplanted Churches from Europe and the New World are to be transformed into the Church of God in which African culture can integrate, in which the African can worship uninhibited emotionally or psychologically in spirit and truth.⁴⁶ Drawing an insinuation from the above understanding of indigenisation of Christianity, Dickson critically examines the very touchy issue of indigenisation. Indigenising Christianity implies that our worship will be accommodative through the use of local and understandable languages, songs and dressings that will not disrupt the weak brother in the worship service. The use of local languages will be an effective tool in evangelism. As a result, the gospel will find home in the hearts of many Africans because communication would have been made easy and accessible.⁴⁶ This is an eye opener to the necessity of indigenisation of Christianity in Africa and all that it entails.

Indigenisation involves the Africans’ direct involvement in the propagation of the gospel within their immediate environment, promotion of African theology coupled with the usage of their indigenous languages as a mode of expression of the Christian faith, indigenous songs and tunes in worship and the incorporation of the African mode of dressing in worship with no cultural inferiority complex.

Harvies describes indigenisation as putting self into the other side of its situation, and to make increase in local participation. He further pinpoints three fundamental features of indigenisation which are: (1) Relatedness of the soil - ability to make elements of local Churches captive of Christ; (2) Possession of an adequately trained ministry, as ministry adapted to local requirements, and; (3) an inner spiritual, nurturing the Christian community, witnessing to the unevangelised.⁴⁶ Mbiti also reinforces the necessity of inculturation in the indigenisation process when he utters that, it is within our culture that we have to wrestle with the demands of the gospel, and it is within our culture that we have to propagate the gospel of our Lord. The gospel does not throw out culture... it comes into our cultures; it settles there, it brings its impact on our total life within that culture. It is within our culture that God wants us to love, worship and obey Him. God does not want to be aliens to our culture- but only aliens to sin. Our culture is the medium of receiving, diffusing, turning in and relaying the Gospel. Without culture we would not believe the gospel and would not inherit the promises of the gospel.⁴⁶

Historical Process of Indigenisation among the Yoruba

It is historically explored, discovered and illuminated that the process toward the indigenisation of Christianity among the Yoruba commenced in the 1890s and later extended to other parts of the country. In all, the Anglican Church had a rapid expansion than other churches especially in Yorubaland. There was no dependant church then but consideration should be taken to ascertain some of the reasons for their later existence within the Anglican Church. Some factors were geographical, political, and social and economical in nature to the rise of African independent churches. As a mark of motivation, the key process was for Nigerian Church leaders to segregate from the western-controlled mission to establish an independence Church. The reasons, then and now, have been consistent: The scope for Nigerians to exercise power within the established mission Church was severely limited; white-based Churches were too critical of Nigerian indigenous customs; there is nothing wrong with polygyny, worship must use local languages and appropriate elements of culture such as songs and dancing. Thus, schism, discrimination in the mission churches, social bigotry, cultural difference, polygamy, and language barrier led to the indigenisation of Christianity. The purpose of the pan-African movement of African theology is to promote an African expression of the interpretation of the gospel.⁴⁶ It could be said that, when Christianity is indigenised, definitely indigenous Church will surface and become fully rooted in the soil of Africa. Musodza opines that true indigenisation, therefore, has to be a new beginning, which seeks to entrench the authenticity of the local cultures, local people and local thought patterns. This is also a process of trying to detach the Church from the domineering Western culture.⁴⁶

Conceptual Framework of The Indigenous Church

Illuminating the conceptual framework of indigenous Church, Soultau expounds that, a Church is not indigenous until it becomes native to the country and grows there naturally as part of the people among whom it has been planted. Therefore, an indigenous Church, young or old, in the East or West, is a Church which, rooted in obedience to Christ, spontaneously uses forms of thought and models of actions natural and familiar in its own environment. Such a Church arises in response to Christ's own call.⁴⁶ Now, from this angle, an indigenous Church is the one that incorporates the culture of the people that belong to it. In other words, it implies Africanised Church. Smalley also defines it as "a group of believers who live out their life, including their socialised Christian activity, in the patterns of the local society, and for whom any transformation of that society comes out their felt needs under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures."⁴⁶ Ayegboyin opines that the indigenised Churches are believed to be somewhat self-supporting, self-financing and self-governing. They do not depend on any Missionary Board, individual or groups abroad for financial and spiritual assistance.⁴⁶ This view is centered on the fact that, for a Church to be indigenous, it must govern, support and propagate herself naturally. It is the Church replicating herself through the spread of the gospel and formation of additional autonomous Churches of like faith and practice. A.R. Tippett, presents six principles of truly indigenous Church which coincide with Deji Ayegboyin's definition. These are: (a) self-image of the Church, (b) self-functioning nature of the Church, (c) self-determining capacity (d) self-supporting nature (e) self-propagating fervor, and (f) devotion to self-giving.⁴⁶ Williams argues that if different behavioural patterns are forced upon a Church-whether conscious or otherwise- then the Church simply cannot be indigenous. The indigenous Church must be free from any foreign cultural imposition.⁴⁶ Adewale highlights what constitutes the indigenous Church. His elucidation indicates that, for the Church in a local land to survive and continue to exist, it must be free from foreign political domination. It must be self-propagating, self-financing and self-governing and it must be adapted to the taste of the local people. These can be done in the hands of the local converts.⁴⁶ This assertion is in line with the policy of Henry Venn agitating for the indigenised Christianity. Without gainsaying, in order to ensure the future existence of the Church in Africa and make it indigenous, the African indigenous Priests facilitated the spread, growth, and expansion of Christianity when it was introduced initially by the foreign missionaries, without whom Christianity would have been ignored by Africans or died naturally.

Ayandele says that Christianity managed to survive in Egypt, in spite of the onslaught of Islam, because it was made to wear Egyptian complexion. Likewise too, Ethiopia became a Christian state because the Ethiopian Church adapted particularly to its environment, incorporating an unmistakable and distinct

Ethiopian flavour.⁴⁶ Nthamburi argues that African Christians remain Africans. In spite of the translated hymns and prayer books, foreign ecclesiastical vestments and architecture, theological training in a foreign language, Africans in the imported denominations remained Africans and Christians at the same time.⁴⁶ It is significant in this study to review the historical background that ushered in the evolution of indigenous Church advocated by African black nationalists. Historical exploration exposes that the craving for the indigenous Church by Africans, emerged in the Nineteenth Century purposely to establish a Christianity that would appreciate African cultural values and customs. The African Christians assiduously desired for a Christianity that would showcase and manifest their identity and world views. Wagenaar does an historical analysis of the methodology adopted by the European missionaries in propagating Christianity which to him can be summarised as falling into two distinct paradigms: The first paradigm, “mission by diffusion,” makes the missionary culture the inseparable carrier of the message. This implies that, the message, which is carried to other peoples and cultures, cannot be extracted from the culture of the carrier, who in this case is the missionary. Indigenous languages and traditions are in anomalous position as they are considered profane over and against the religious language and culture of the missionary which are to be implanted in the receiving society. In his conclusion, “Mission by translation” is the second paradigm, designated as “the vintage mark of Christianity” for the following reason: it “is characterised as making the recipient culture the true and final locus of the proclamation”. In this paradigm, the message needs to be translated into the language and cultural context of those who receive the message.⁴⁶

Nmah and Udezo, showcase that evangelism has certainly failed when some Africans who call themselves Christians, set up edifices where they congregate for worship, yet cannot say from their hearts and in their own words whom Jesus is, what he has done and is doing for them corporately and individually. And what he means to them as the absolute Lord of life – the whole of life – within the context of the world in which they live in.⁴⁶ Indigenous African Churches dates from the late Nineteenth century where agitation for more scope for African leadership in the Churches and the quest to make the Church more indigenous resulted in secession from the mission Churches. In Nigeria, they were called the African Churches, elsewhere they were called Ethiopian Churches. The first of these African Churches was the Native Baptist Church founded in March, 1888 after secession from the Lagos Baptist Church. The African Churches had the goal of promoting indigenous leadership in the Church, evangelising Africa by African means, and making Christianity culturally more relevant to Africans.⁴⁶ In the same vein, Deji Ayegboyin and Ademola Ishola in their work, *African Indigenous Churches - Some Problems of Terminology.....* add that the ethnocentrism of the then missionaries contributed immensely to the emergence

of indigenous Churches.⁴⁶ This movement resulted in the Euthanasia of mission Churches and establishment, growth and expansion of African indigenised Church.

Indigenous Contributions to the Indigenisation of Christianity

Commenting on the historical positive impressions made on the indigenisation of Christianity in Nigeria, Olumakaye, citing Asaju, divulges that in the Anglican Church of Nigeria historical context, Church fathers led by Bishop James Johnson initiated policy of decolonisation and indigenisation, which pioneer nationalists built upon in Ethiopianism which was the use of Church's platform to fight for national independence. Prior to independence and even still afterwards, complete decolonisation has not been achieved. One area where traces of its basic roots still thrive is in the Church liturgy. More so, for a Church which very name-Anglican betrays the hangover of colonial heritage, there is still Anglican Communion of which head is the Queen of England just as the Commonwealth of nations; who says Africans are fully free? Therefore the fight for inculturation persists! Not that we Africans have indeed really justified that we are mature enough to govern ourselves well after the white men led us. We have made such a mess of our national life and resources; that fight for complete Africanisation is self-deceiving.⁴⁶ There is the possibility for Africans to have an absolute Africanisation. It is a gradual process with the wave of African Christianity. Jeffrey indicates that, the racist theories of white superiority had become part of the baggage of most whites who went to Africa from the 1880s, and Africans – inside and outside the Church- were treated with contempt.⁴⁶This assumed superiority of the white missionaries will make Africans to fight for a complete Africanisation.

For instance, in the bid of indigenising the Church in Africa, Bishop James 'Holy Johnson', a West African proto-nationalist, emerged as the second African to be ordained an Anglican bishop after Samuel Ajayi Crowther and was a critical figure in preserving his Church in the face of separatism led by independent Churchmen. He became a pastor of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) assigned to the 'native pastorate'. James Johnson advocated the evangelisation of Africa by Africans, under African leadership, and thus did not make an easy colleague for British missionaries. He was one of the early advocates of the philosophy of indigenisation. In 1881, he led the Breadfruit Church into the native pastorate, and by 1884, he refused to baptise children with names other than African names. Such derogatory terms as 'native' when alluding to anything indigenous; 'dialects' when alluding to African languages; 'heathenism' or 'paganism' or even 'superstition' when reference was being made to the people's religion, were well known.⁴⁶ The diminishing role of the elite after the 1880s affected its attitude to colonial expansion and to the Church. Initial optimism began to hate or resent Europeans for their racism and arrogance. Africans began

to react to what they perceived as racism or their marginalisation by Europeans. In the words of Hastings, “the early European missionaries thought that it was better for Christianity to have a new social order, a new economy and a new culture to replace the traditional one”.⁴⁶ Ayandele also discovers the Babylonian cultural captivity in which the Africans were hooked by the European missionaries when Christianity was introduced. The Europeans required trousers for the Church services in Lagos. When the Africans complied, they were accused of “aping”. When they mixed the two cultures, they were referred to as “half-civilised”. Such was the cultural dilemma of the emerging educated elites in the 1880s by which they were embittered. Therefore by 1886, the bitterness had got to an alarming proportion. A group of Africans in that year called “for the organisation of African Church under the system adopted by the Congregationists... “We cry word in our ears, SECESSION! SECESSION!! SECESSION!!!⁴⁶. Thus, cultural slavery in which the Africans were put by the European missionaries facilitated the indigenisation of Christianity in Africa.⁴⁶ G. Mukuka exhumes that missionaries came to spread the gospel, but were influenced by their political and religious backgrounds and deeply entrenched in their Western culture.⁴⁶ Kofi Appiah-Kubi remarks that the indigenous African Churches through careful adoption of certain cultural elements into their worship have made Christianity real and meaningful to their African adherents.⁴⁶ The submissions of the scholars reveal the need for the necessity of the indigenisation of the Church by African Christians.

Bolaji Idowu opines that liturgy should be seen within the African context as people’s way of approaching God in worship as a means of expressing themselves, especially in a congregational setting, before God and of assuring themselves of communion with him. Indigenisation would afford Nigerians to worship in ways compatible with their own spiritual temperament of singing, praying, reading and hearing the Scriptures in manners clearly intelligible to them. Spiritual suitability for Africans are not to be found in the Anglican liturgy, or in the Methodist recession of it according to the book of offices as it is imparted into Africa by the missionaries. When hymns, psalms, or canticles are translated from English into Nigerian languages and then sung to European tunes, then we often find ourselves attaining the limit of cultic atrocity.⁴⁶ Samson Fatokun affirms that emotional vacuum was a result of the kind of Christianity brought by the missionaries to Africa. He contends that this cold and formalistic style of worship did not meet the spiritual tempo of Africans, hence, their movement to other Churches. The gospel must be relevant to the recipients that the running and administration of the Church must be done by members, and that African worldview and understanding must be allowed to reflect in the life of the Church.⁴⁶ In this while, Africans should worship God in an African way. Their culture should be embedded in their worship pattern using their local language to communicate the gospel. However, despite the revolution for the need of the

indigenous Church by Africans, and the frailty of the European Missionaries, the frantic efforts made by the foreign missionaries in the evangelisation of Africa are commendable.

Conclusion

Fundamentally, indigenisation of Christianity becomes possible if the Church changes from its base. In order to make Christianity feel at home, inculturation needs to be integrated into Christianity and this can be done in diverse ways. In order to promote our cultural heritage in Christianity, the paper therefore, recommends the following:

1. Every ethnic group should be allowed to integrate acceptable values, customs and beliefs into Church celebrations. For instance, traditional aspects of naming ceremony. The Church should revisit and incorporate the use of traditional elements such as the kola nut, bitter kola, alligator pepper, salt, honey, sugar cane, and water for naming and marriage ceremonies as it was practised in the ancient times; thus far, these items remain culturally symbolic.
2. Liturgy and worship are very fundamental because they are the life wire of the Church through which the people receive spiritual nourishment. The Church should strive more to compose traditional worship songs and tunes and introduce drumming and dancing, into her worship. Indigenous songs provide possibilities for making allusions to the bases of religious experience and to the values that grip a community of worshippers together, and mix both biblical and African moral and religious values. Therefore, the singing aspect should be accompanied by musical instruments, clapping and dancing. Importantly, the worshippers must be given freedom to pray more extemporaneously and make distinctive entreaties to God in their own words and language. For instance, the Holy Ghost Congress Program organized by the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) held along Lagos/Ibadan express way from 3rd to 11th December, 2016, revealed the inculturation of Christianity which we are agitating here. Examples of this were the special traditional songs uniquely composed and rendered by the African Praise Team in the indigenous languages: Yoruba, Hausa and Ibo and the special traditional songs which were sung by Pastor E.A. Adeboye, the General Overseer, and his traditional Yoruba group of singers coupled with traditional *Ewi* with tune to praise God and bless the congregants. All these dynamisms made their worship livelier, *Christocentric* and African. Different traditional Yoruba musical instruments were used during the program with Yoruba attires worn by the singers and dancers including pastor Adeboye and his wife. All these they did with the use of cow tail (*irukere*) to dance.
3. Another aspect that calls for a critical consideration in the process of the indigenisation of Christianity is the use of the word 'ase' after prayer (iwure). The psychology of the Yoruba, as of most African peoples, is that such a word

has its inherent efficacious power which when uttered ‘certainly’ sanctions the request, and a compulsive and unfailing effect is guaranteed.

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