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Becoming Consciously Christian, Authentically African: Positive Values in African Culture and the Strengthening of the Christian Faith

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Abstract: **This article examines the relationship between positive values in African culture and the strengthening of Christian faith in Africa. It argues that the early missionary encounter between Christianity and African culture was marked by a failure to recognize continuities between African religious heritage and the gospel – a failure that has contributed to the persistent identity crisis experienced by many African Christians. Drawing on the insights of Kwame Bediako, John Mbiti, Theophilus Okere, and Augustine of Hippo's model of "spoiling the Egyptians," the article contends that African cultural and religious values contain elements that can serve as praeparatio evangelica – preparation for the gospel. Through a comparative analysis of the Decalogue and African worldviews, and a case study of the Ofo symbol in Igbo culture, the article proposes a model of critical appropriation that avoids both the Scylla of cultural alienation and the Charybdis of uncritical syncretism. It concludes that the task of African theology today is to articulate a unified vision in which African Christians can be both authentically African and consciously Christian.**

Keywords: **Inculturation, African theology, Christian identity, praeparatio evangelica, cultural continuity, Kwame Bediako, Theophilus Okere.**

1. INTRODUCTION

The future of Christianity may well lie in Africa. While Christianity in Europe – the birthplace of most of the missionaries who evangelized Africa – struggles to remain relevant in the practical life of the continent, several African regions are experiencing a flowering of the Christian message. This southward shift has been extensively documented: Philip Jenkins famously argued that the demographic centre of gravity of global Christianity had moved decisively to the Global South, with Africa experiencing the most dramatic growth. Pew Research Centre data confirms that by 2020, sub-Saharan Africa had surpassed Europe as the region with the largest Christian population, home to approximately 31% of the world's Christians. But what kind of Christian church is alive in Africa? Is it an authentically African Christian church, or a church built on borrowed garbs? This question frames the central problematic: How can an African Christian become consciously Christian as well as authentically African?

The scale of this question becomes apparent when we consider the demographic transformation of global Christianity. In 1900, approximately 80 percent of Christians lived in Europe and North America; by the early twenty-first century, the demographic centre of gravity had shifted decisively to the Global South (Pew Research Center, 2011). Yet this numerical expansion has not been matched by a corresponding development of genuinely inculturated theological and liturgical expressions. Many African Christians continue to live their Christian lives in what Okere (2002/2015) describes as "borrowed garbs" – a condition of alienation in which the gospel is experienced as foreign to the cultural sensibilities of the people who profess it. Okere's critique of Western Christianity's individualistic orientation and his call for an African

alternative grounded in communal values underscores the depth of this alienation. The persistence of such "borrowed garbs" raises pressing questions about whether the remarkable growth of Christianity in Africa has been accompanied by a corresponding deepening of authentic African Christian identity.

The argument advanced here is that positive values embedded in African cultural and religious traditions can and should be utilized in the strengthening of the Christian faith. This is not a call for syncretism or for the uncritical baptism of every traditional practice. Rather, it is an argument for what Augustine of Hippo called the "spoiling of the Egyptians" – the discerning appropriation of what is true and good in a culture for the service of the gospel (Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, Book II, Chapter 40) . The African heritage, like the Greco-Roman culture that the early Church Fathers engaged, contains "gold and silver" that belong by right to the God who is the source of all truth.

This article proceeds in four parts. First, it examines the initial encounter between Christianity and African culture, arguing that the exclusivist approach adopted by most missionaries was a departure from the apostolic precedent. Second, it presents the case for continuity through a comparative analysis of the Decalogue and African values, supplemented by the witness of Mbiti and Bediako. Third, it addresses the crisis of African Christian identity and proposes a model of critical appropriation, illustrated through Okere's work on the Christianization of the Ofo symbol. Finally, it considers the challenges and prospects for African theology in the contemporary context.

2. THE INITIAL ENCOUNTER: CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN CULTURE

2.1 Three Approaches to Cultural Encounter

A new missionary religion cannot be adequately imported into a cultural vacuum. Usually the new religion comes into a concrete human community – actual peoples with daily patterns of life and local ideas about God, humanity, and society. Generally, three possible approaches are possible wherever Christianity comes into contact with other cultures and religious traditions (Ferdinando, 2007, pp. 121–143).

The *exclusivist or particularistic approach* holds that salvation and truth are found only through an explicit knowledge and confession of Christ, and that the cultural heritage of those who do not know Christ has little or no salvific value. The Old Testament provides apparent warrant for this approach in the command to destroy the religious cultural heritage of the Canaanite peoples (Deuteronomy 7:1–5; 12:2–3; Exodus 34:13–14). Psalm 106:34–39 is particularly emphatic that the failure of Israel to obey this injunction became the seed of her future downfall: "They did not destroy the peoples, as the LORD commanded them, but they mixed with the nations and learned to do as they did. They served their idols, which became a snare to them."

The *inclusivist approach* holds that salvation is found only in Christ but may be mediated through non-Christian religions or philosophies apart from any explicit knowledge of Christ. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) represents a decisive moment in the early Church's adoption of this approach: the Gentiles were not to be circumcised or forced to keep the Mosaic Law, but were to retain their cultural identity while adhering to certain essential elements of the faith. The inclusivist position is grounded in the conviction that the pre-incarnate Logos has been at work among all peoples in a saving manner – a conviction articulated by Justin Martyr through his doctrine of the logos spermatikos (the "seminal word" scattered throughout human history) and by Augustine through his model of spoiling the Egyptians.

The *pluralist approach* sees Christ as simply one means of salvation and truth among many others. This position, while influential in contemporary academic discourse, falls outside the scope of the present argument, which assumes the normative character of the Christian revelation while insisting on the value of pre-Christian cultural resources.

2.2 The Exclusivist Legacy in Africa

The early encounter between Christianity and African culture and religion was predominantly exclusivist and, as a result, turbulent. The majority of early missionaries involved in the evangelization of Africa were impatient with indigenous culture and held a decidedly negative attitude toward African religions. African religious traditions were branded "pagan" and "superstitious" and were to be discarded entirely. Salvation for the African was conceived as a way of freeing him or her from entanglements with the pre-Christian heritage.

The novels of Chinua Achebe detail the tensions and intense struggle between the new "foreign" Christian faith and the traditional religious way of life (Okoye, 1987). In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe describes life in Igbo traditional society before it began to unravel after the arrival of European colonizers and missionaries in the late nineteenth century. His follow-

up novels – *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) – detail the struggles of notable figures in Igbo society to bridge the gap between the European and African worlds. In the clash of the two worlds, Achebe saw only one winner – the imperialist culture – and bemoans the gradual erosion of African values, practices, and ways of life.

The fate of Nwoye, Okonkwo's son in *Things Fall Apart*, is emblematic. Nwoye's conversion to Christianity stemmed from two primary factors: his rejection of aspects of Igbo heritage such as child abandonment and the killing of Ikemefuna, and his desire to escape his father's domineering gender expectations. His survival comes coupled with both a new religious belief and psychological relief, yet he suffers fundamental losses of cultural identity and ancestral being. Achebe's portrayal suggests that the act of survival through assimilation bestows both positive progress and personal losses.

2.3 The Patristic Precedent

It is not as if Africa is the only continent where this clash of cultures occurred. Christian theologians in the second and third centuries of the Christian era were equally concerned with the question of how to appropriate the cultural wealth of the classical world – poetry, philosophy, and literature (McGrath, 2001). What values from the Greco-Roman world were to be adopted and adapted by Christian writers in expounding the Christian faith without compromising that faith? This debate involved the very best theological minds of the time: Justin Martyr (c. 100 – c. 165), Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130 – c. 200), Origen (c. 185 – 254), and Tertullian (c. 160 – c. 225).

Justin Martyr sought to use the parallels between Christianity and Platonism as an avenue to communicate the Christian faith. For him, Christianity could draw upon classical culture since the heritage of this culture ultimately draws upon divine wisdom and insight – the logos spermatikos that has been scattered throughout human history. Tertullian took the opposite direction. For him, Athens has nothing to do with Jerusalem: Christianity must maintain its distinctive identity by avoiding contamination from the mental and moral environment in which it takes root (McGrath, 2001, p. 17). Justin and Tertullian represent the two spectrums of insight on the relationship between Christianity and secular or indigenous cultures.

In the case of Africa, it is as if Tertullian won the battle. Most early missionaries attempted to transform converts into Europeanized African Christians. The Nwoyes of each generation have insisted that there must be a sharp discontinuity between the Christian faith and traditional ideals about God, human life, and society.

Yet the victory of this approach must now be reassessed. We are increasingly seeing a situation where many Christians and churches are falling back on African traditional ways of celebrating important life-situations. Western-trained theologians still use the discriminatory epithet "neopaganism" to describe this phenomenon. But just as the discontinuity of the early African converts with their pre-Christian heritage became a complicating element in their African identity, the contemporary syncretism of African traditional religious rites and Christian practices is equally proving to be a complicating factor in Christian identity. Has Christianity been only a varnish covering the real "heathen" mindset of the African Christian? Can anyone today be a consciously Christian African without the temptation to self-denigration and self-abasement of his or her identity as an African?

3. THE CASE FOR CONTINUITY: AFRICAN VALUES AND THE GOSPEL

3.1 Mbiti's Praeparatio Evangelica

When the European missionaries rejected African culture as heathen, they overlooked a crucial fact: it was not solely their missionary zeal that convinced Africans to accept the Christian message. Most Africans accepted the gospel because they saw their own values mirrored in it. Many African values, without explicitly naming Christ, already pointed toward the Christian God.

This is the position of one of Africa's foremost theologians, John Mbiti. As Bediako (1993, p. 372) notes, Mbiti's assertion of "the African pre-Christian heritage" as praeparatio evangelica is "the most enduring paradigm" in his writings. Mbiti (1988–1989, p. 60) asks whether the God who is the Father of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the God of the Bible, is the same God acknowledged in African Traditional Religions, and answers positively. On the basis of African monotheism and in objection to the traditional distinction between general and special revelation, Mbiti presumes that African Traditional Religions are to a large extent compatible with Christianity and that many parallel elements can merge without conflict.

Mbiti collected over two thousand primary and attributive names of God across African languages and concluded that all African peoples and languages have a notion of the One Supreme Being. In many African languages, the name of God or the word for God is used in the singular form. Mbiti argues that this phenomenon demonstrates that African Traditional Religion is "a deeply monotheistic religion".

If the God of biblical revelation is the same God who has been worshipped for ages by African peoples, then there must be continuities between the African heritage and the Christian faith. The question then becomes: what would have been the effects of a positive evaluation of African culture by the missionaries? What could have happened if African culture had been rightfully seen as a servant of the gospel? If Africans were worthy candidates for conversion, why not an engagement with their cultural heritage?

3.2 Augustine's Model of Appropriation

Augustine of Hippo articulated a model for the relationship between Christianity and pre-Christian culture that remains instructive for African theologians today. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine writes:

"If those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it. For, as the Egyptians had not only the idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel hated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and garments, which the same people when going out of Egypt appropriated to themselves, designing them for a better use... in the same way all branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil... but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad" (Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, II.40.60).

This passage provides a theological warrant for the critical appropriation of African cultural values. The "gold and silver" of the Egyptians – their philosophical and moral insights – were not to be rejected simply because they came from a pagan context. Rather, they were to be separated from their idolatrous associations and put to proper use in the service of the gospel. Augustine's model is neither colonial nor imperialistic; it is an act of discerning appropriation that enriches the Church while respecting the integrity of the source culture.

3.3 Comparative Analysis: The Decalogue and African Values

The case for continuity between African cultural values and the Christian faith can be illustrated through a comparative analysis of the Ten Commandments and African worldviews. The following table is not intended to suggest an identity between the two, but rather to identify points of resonance – areas where African values already point in the direction of the gospel's moral demands.

N	The Ten Commandments	African Values and Worldviews
1	I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you lived as slaves. You shall have no other gods to rival me	Value: divine pre-eminence. The concept of Chukwu as the supreme being, with other deities functioning as channels through which the supreme being is approached. Does the concept of this supreme being in African indigenous religion come close to monotheism?
2	You shall not make yourself a carved image... You shall not bow down to them or serve them	Value: God's incomparability; respect for God's name Amanchukwu: God is full of endless forms and riddles; Chukwuenweghiatu: God's incomparability. In Igboland there is no cult or shrine dedicated to the supreme God—Chukwu. Africans take oaths in God's name when they are uncertain of their innocence
3	Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy	Value: rest, balance, prayer and worship There are sacred days, sacred time, sacred places and objects in African Traditional Religion. Many communities do not celebrate marriages or burials on particular market days

4	Honour your father and your mother	Value: family life, care and respect Africa places great value on respect for parents, elders, and title holders
5	You shall not kill	Value: respect and reverence for human life Reverence for life and avoidance of the shedding of blood, especially of one's kinsmen. When prominent men die and must be buried with human heads, the victim can never come from the same community
6	You shall not commit adultery	Value: faithfulness, love and keeping promises Encourages sexual abstinence for the unmarried and repudiates all forms of illicit sexual activity
7	You shall not steal	Value: fairness, honesty and justice There are severe disciplinary measures to check criminal activities; the Ofo symbolism serves as a guarantor of truth and justice
8	You shall not give false evidence against your neighbour	Value: truth, integrity, honesty and goodness There are oaths taken to vindicate those accused falsely
9	You shall not set your heart on your neighbour's house... or anything that belongs to your neighbour	Value: contentment, gratitude, respect for others There are heavy negative consequences for marital infidelities. Among the Yoruba there is the concept of Magun, a trap for a wife caught cheating. Numerous methods, including oath-taking, establish ownership of property
10	You shall not covet your neighbour's goods	Value: gratitude, generosity (See 9 above.)

As the table suggests, there are clear continuities between African indigenous culture and religion and the biblical God. And the tragedy is that even as late as the 1950s and 1960s, some European anthropologists continued to call African religions "primitive" while accepting the much older Yahweh religion as a guide to contemporary Christian life and practice.

3.4 Bediako and the Missionary Failure

Kwame Bediako was one of the foremost African theologians who occupied himself intensively with the shortcomings of the missionary movement in Africa. For Bediako, the missionary era did not allow Africans to keep any positive memories of their religious traditions. Africans were thus robbed of their self-identity and self-consciousness. Bediako writes: "A natural effect of the missionary outlook of modern times was a certain tendency to confuse their institutionalized Christianity with Christ, to make the former the bestower of salvation. By fastening so intently on the 'sheer paganism' and awfulness of African 'heathen superstitions' Western missionaries were considerably less conscious of the 'heathen' as men with their utterly human fears and joys, hopes and disappointments, and yearnings for salvation" (Bediako, quoted in Howard, 2013).

By confusing the Western version of Christianity with Christ, the missionaries were not following the "apostolic precedent" of valuing the Gentile cultures they encountered in spreading the gospel. Bediako explains that in failing to apprehend and follow this precedent, "our modern missionaries, by the same token, deprived themselves of the means of recognising and articulating the universal nature and activity of Christ among the 'heathen' they encountered". By not using the noble philosophical and cultural elements of the primal religions as a stepping stone toward the gospel, most conversions to Christianity were coupled with cultural discontinuity.

Missionaries should not have suppressed the African primal worldview but could have redeemed and integrated it. African religious and cultural values may have had some negative elements. But following the apostolic precedent, the missionaries ought to have tried to use them as a positive base for Africans to build their Christian identity.

4. THE CRISIS OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

4.1 Alienation as the Malady

Our foregoing discussions make the argument for a dialogue between the Christian faith and African culture a compelling one. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo dies in the frantic search for his lost identity (Onyemelukwe, 2004, pp. 35–46). It will be a huge service to the African continent if theology can come to the aid of Okonkwo in the effort to recover this lost identity and shape it anew.

The Catholic Church's official position is that "all cultures have a right to an independent existence within Christianity and that the introduction of Christian teachings in a new culture must involve an 'adoption' that preserves the essential integrity of culture, its values, institutions, and customs" (Kurgat, 2009, p. 090). The gospel has been preached and practiced on African shores for over a century, and yet it is still struggling to take concrete forms in indigenous culture, devoid of the European garb in which it came. As a result, inculturation remains largely a theoretical issue without much practical application.

Kurgat (2009, p. 090) quotes Pope John Paul II, who encouraged Africans to seek the organic link between Christianity and indigenous culture: "the synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith." African theology today must take the debate about the relationship between gospel and culture seriously. When Christianity came on the heels of colonial rule in many African countries, Africans lost not only their political freedom but also suffered a crisis in their identity. The task for African theology in general, then, is to make clear that Christianity and European civilization are not identical and, what is more, to prove that Christianity is a non-Western religion (Wagenaar, 1999).

Okere (2002) bemoans the alienation that most African Christians feel:

"Part of the general malaise that grips our peoples today and part of the reason for the listlessness and lawlessness, the general insecurity and lack of direction in our lives, pronounced in social life, can be summarized in the word alienation. Alienation is the malady of someone estranged from himself, someone not truly himself, especially by reason of being uprooted; someone given a false personality and forced to live an inauthentic life. When someone's personality is driven underground, and he is obliged to wear another's or a camouflage, when someone fails to recognize himself by reason of a false identity imposed on him, he is alienated. When he is no more himself but another in one way or another, he is alienated" (Okere, 2002/2015, p. 120).

If the missionary methods of evangelization aggravated the alienation felt today by the African Christian, the rehabilitation of Africa's cultural heritage and religious consciousness must be an essential work for African theologians today in clarifying the nature and meaning of African Christian identity. Such a task will seek to recognize the subtle ways a neo-imperialistic mindset prevents the adoption of cultural values and thought patterns into the African Christian identity.

4.2 Memory and Identity

Bediako (1994, p. 15) quotes Mbiti, who rightfully accuses the post-missionary Church in Africa of being a "Church without theology and without theological consciousness." An African Christian consciousness cannot be acquired in a vacuum but must be able to integrate the existence of a pre-Christian memory: "Memory is integral to identity: without memory we have no past, and if we have no past, then we lose our identity" (Bediako, 1994, p. 15).

The task before us is to see how to blend the African religious past with the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Okere (2002) envisages this task as follows: "Part of the cure to our sick society is trying to give it back its own self, restoring some of its self-respect by putting back its mangled and scattered parts and making it whole again. Giving it back its own tried instruments of work will restore some of its former efficiency and prepare it best to adapt to future challenges" (Okere, 2002/2015, p. 121).

4.3 A Case Study: The Christianization of Ofo Igbo

Okere attempts this integration in many of his works. In his 2002 presentation to the Owerri Archdiocesan Catholic Laity Council, he makes an effort at a "Christianization of Ofo Igbo." Relying on the authoritative account of Ofo symbolism by Ejizu, Okere notes that Christianity did appropriate many pagan symbolisms when it arrived on the European continent. Many of the adjuncts to worship in Christianity today – candles, incense, music, perfumes, lights, ablutions, floral decorations, canopies, bells, vestments, among others – were appropriated by Christianity to enhance the splendour of religious ceremonials.

Okere recalls some of the ritual uses of Ofo identified by Ejizu: prayer, sacrifices, establishing contact with spiritual forces, magical and religious uses, usage in naming ceremonies, determining the calendar, affirmation of moral uprightness, sealing of covenants, legitimizing office or status, decision making, settling disputes, oath-taking, and the promulgation and enforcement of law. For Okere, the best way to Christianize culture or elements of it is "by changing its symbolism, that is by Christianizing intentions and meanings, by imposing new and Christian meanings on the old symbols, leaving the material symbol intact" (Okere, 2002/2015, p. 121).

Okere thinks the Ofo symbol is especially qualified for Christian appropriation for three reasons:

1. Because of the reverence and high esteem, the deep spiritual meaning, the strategic socio-political role, and the divine association the Igbo give this symbol. Ofo is the most respected moral symbol in Igboland.

2. Ofokaja: the belief that Ofo is more powerful than Aja (sacrifice). The gods can be confused or exploited by aja. Ofo is greater than and different from aja because it is based on a simpler, more reliable, more transparent, and truthful principle. Here we can hear echoes of the biblical saying: "Obedience is better than sacrifice." A life of righteousness, as Jesus says, is of more value than a thousand sacrifices.

3. The Ofo is not worshipped as a god by the Igbo. The symbol is not tainted with idolatry. It is one symbol standing for Igbo ideals that coincide with those of the gospel.

It is for these reasons that Okere thinks the Ofo can be introduced as a symbol for liturgical uses in Igbo Christianity in the following ways:

- Carrying it in procession. An Ofo bearer can walk beside the cross bearer, in a way similar to how Americans use their flags even in American churches.
- Placing the Ofo on the altar during Mass, similar to how papal and national flags fly side by side around the altar. Here the Ofo can represent the ancestors and God, truth and justice, and conscience.
- Using it to swear by as one would the Bible, since it is the symbol of God's truth and the traditional object used for swearing. This would reunite Christians and non-Christians in the non-partisan pursuit of justice, social peace, and harmony.

5. CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR AFRICAN THEOLOGY

5.1 The Identity Question

The question of identity emerges as the leading issue in any effort to articulate the place of African values within the practice of the Christian faith. Avoiding identity ambiguity was a crucial element of the Christian mission in the world. As Bauman (1995) observes: "One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs, that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence. 'Identity' is a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty" (Bauman, 1995, p. 17).

Identity formation is a dynamic process contingent, to a large extent, on the ever-evolving nature of society. Especially since the dawn of postmodernity, the tension has exacerbated between the concept of identity as something "solid" or "stable" and the effort to avoid fixation and keep options open. Bauman contrasts the modern and postmodern understandings: "The catchword of modernity was creation; the catchword of postmodernity is recycling. Or one may say that if the media which was the message of modernity was the photographic paper... the ultimately postmodern medium is the videotape (eminently erasable and re-usable, calculated not to hold anything for ever...). The main identity-bound anxiety of modern times was the worry about durability; it is the concern with commitment-avoidance today. Modernity built in steel and concrete; postmodernity, in bio-degradable plastic" (Bauman, 1995, p. 18).

As a result, discerning one's identity in our contemporary postmodern world has become an altogether complicated endeavour. Identity is an important category in theology. African theology today must grapple with the same issue of identity that the first generation of converts to Christianity had to grapple with. As Bediako says:

"As it emerged in the post-missionary context of African Christianity in the 1950s and 1960s, the question of identity entailed... confronting constantly the problem of how 'old' and 'new' in African religious consciousness could become integrated in a unified vision of what it meant to be Christian and African... African theology, therefore, by becoming something of a dialogue between the African Christian scholar and the perennial religions and spiritualities of Africa was thereby a struggle for an appropriate Christian discourse which would account for and hold together the total religious experience of Africans in a coherent and meaningful pattern. Identity itself thus became a theological concern and the formulation of theological questions were linked as the inevitable by-product of a process of Christian self-definition" (Bediako, 1992, p. 5).

Central to any inclusive self-definition of the identity of the Christian African is the question: How can the African be consciously Christian without rejecting his or her African values and heritage? Since the traditional religious milieu is still tied to the religious imagination of the Christian African, integrating these values within Christian identity will be one important way of defining their place in the daily lives of the African Christian.

5.2 The Task of African Theology

African cultural and religious traditions have more continuity than discontinuity with the gospel. Bediako suggests that more African theologians turn to the patristic writings for guidance on present-day identity issues, since the Greco-Roman situation provides a similar cultural-religious backdrop for believers of the second century as African Traditional Religion does for Christian Africans today.

The first challenge before us is already apparent from the way we have been interchanging between "Christian Africans" and "African Christians." What should be the correct description? What should serve as adjective in our identity, and what serves as the substantive noun? For most of us baptized as infants, does our Christianity modify our Africanness, or did we become Christians first, before the discovery of our Africanness? If we take our Africanness as the enduring identity, are we today Africans in the same way our pre-Christian ancestors were?

The next challenge is to clearly delineate the aim of an integrative vision of Christian religious experience and African traditions. What should African scholars pursue: a decolonization of Christianity or the Africanization of Christian theology? These questions may be understood as different sides of a single coin: the felt need for an indigenization of Christianity in Africa. The urge to indigenize "translates a certain yearning to be oneself, to be authentic, to be as God made us. It is an assuming of one's culture and the willingness to serve God in it. In this sense, it is a certain coming of age, a readiness to be oneself and a wish to be accepted as such" (Okere, 1973/2015, p. 444).

The Africanization of Christian theology must reflect seriously on its African context and address specific issues that affect Christianity on the continent. A decidedly African flavour to doing theology does not imply that African scholars cut themselves off from the universal Christian community. Africa remains an integral part of the human family, and attention to issues that concern Africans will be part of the indigenization endeavour. A theological turn toward the African socio-cultural and religious context, as well as the religious experiences of African Christians, must be careful to avoid reinforcing negative perceptions and stereotypes about traditional African religious experiences.

5.3 The Contribution of African Values to Christian Spirituality

Today's African society is rudderless in terms of cultural values. Our generation of Africans is in many ways different from our forefathers in faith who were converted by European missionaries. Contemporary theology in Africa must still remain a missionary theology – a theology that must show more empathy toward the positive values of African culture and religion, that must avoid the pitfall of portraying Africa as the dark continent.

The starting point for this discussion will not be the exploration of doctrines or religious truths, but spirituality or religious experience. The interaction between African values and the message of the Christian faith should mark a creative phase in defining the content and scope of an African Christian spirituality.

The gift of living and connecting with the Holy in such a way that our lives and our world are transformed is a gift given across various religious spectrums and countless cultural settings. Everywhere in Africa, indigenous peoples have always tried, through rites, myths, and symbols, to get in touch with human depths and connect with the sacred as life situations unfold. Butler and Butler (1996) describe spirituality as "a fall through ordinary life into the depths of life," and imply that all peoples have their specific ways of encountering the holiness, the mystery, the fear and fascination of existence (pp. 1 – 2). Borrowing a clue from the New Testament, the writers affirm that spirituality – the encounter with the holy – was not an experience restricted to particular objects, peoples, or times, but something that can explode suddenly in the course of ordinary life: "To the New Testament writers, holiness was encountered in unexpected ways in the midst of ordinary life. Following Jesus was to live in the same world as usual but to see it in a totally different way; as though wearing spectacles for the first time, a blurred world suddenly became clear" (Butler & Butler, 1996, p. 2).

In a sense, the cultural dislocation and identity crisis of the African Christian presents a unique opportunity for self-construction, for a spiritual journey of identity-recovery. A pilgrimage to God is, after all, not only a journey of God-discovery but equally an exercise in self-recovery and self-discovery. The post-Reformation world of modernity mirrors, on one hand, the cultural search for identity of the African Christian. Like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, the contemporary African Christian must be ready to remake the world he or she inherited.

For the Christian African on the search to discover himself or herself within the God-discovery, a life of pilgrimage is a necessity, lest he or she be lost in the world, walking with no purpose and no destination. In the first commandment, God identifies himself as the same God who led the people of Israel out of the oppressive hands of the Egyptians. The Christian God is not a deity for a people rooted to a spot in their religious experiences. The African Christian today must be keenly aware of the changes taking place in daily life: awakening to freedom and wholeness, confronted with the many mysteries of life, responding to situations that arise when life patterns break up and new patterns need to be fabricated.

African Christian spirituality, in this understanding, will mean all the attempts to integrate both Christian and indigenous wisdom to perfect the contemporary African. The role of the African worldview and African values in the daily lives of African Christians – how these values interface with the Christian lifestyle – will constitute the practical content of an indigenous African Christian spirituality.

5.4 Language and Inculturation

The first steps in the inculturation effort and the starting point for an inculturation theology must be language. After the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the use of vernacular languages in Christian worship has progressed at an accelerating rate. Christianity in Africa today is experiencing the "translatability" of the gospel into indigenous languages, using categories that originate in the traditional worldview. This linguistic inculturation is not merely a matter of translation but of theological creativity: when the gospel is expressed in indigenous languages, new dimensions of meaning emerge that were obscured in the European languages through which the faith was originally mediated to Africa.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that positive values embedded in African cultural and religious traditions can and should be utilized in the strengthening of the Christian faith. The early missionary encounter, dominated by an exclusivist approach, failed to recognize the continuities between African heritage and the gospel – continuities that Mbiti, Bediako, and Okere have subsequently articulated. The result has been a persistent crisis of identity for African Christians, who have been taught to despise their own heritage while professing a faith that came to them in European garb.

The model of critical appropriation articulated by Augustine – the spoiling of the Egyptians – provides a theological warrant for a different approach. African cultural values, like the gold and silver of Egypt, contain truths and goods that belong by right to the God who is the source of all truth. The task of African theology today is to separate these values from their idolatrous associations and put them to proper use in the service of the gospel.

This is not a task that can be accomplished once and for all. As Bauman's analysis of identity in modernity and postmodernity suggests, the search for identity is an ongoing process, never fully completed. The African Christian who seeks to be both authentically African and consciously Christian is a pilgrim – always on the way, always discovering new dimensions of what it means to be both. The Ofo symbol, Christianized and incorporated into liturgical life, is one concrete example of what this critical appropriation might look like. But it is only a beginning.

What can our Africanness contribute to our existence as Christians? Our Christianity necessarily involves a measure of discontinuity with our pre-Christian past. Is that past a burden or a benefit, a hindrance or an asset to our life as Christians? The argument of this article is that it can be an asset – but only if we have the courage to claim it, to sift it, and to offer it to God for the service of the gospel. The task of African theology is to help the Okonkwos of our continent to recover their lost identity and shape it anew. It is a task that will require both a deep knowledge of the African heritage and a robust commitment to the Christian faith. But it is a task worth undertaking, for it is nothing less than the construction of a Christian identity that is both catholic (universal) and African.

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