Chapter Twenty

Christianity and the African Cultural Heritage

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INTRODUCTION

The term *Culture* in its widest usage is the totality of a people’s way of life. Language is one of the most important aspects of a people’s identity because it is the most common medium of communication. But it is not the only ingredient of culture. Moreover, when a language becomes an international medium of communication it ceases to be the exclusive possession of the people who initially developed it for their cultural identity and communication. This has happened with English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian and Arabic. These languages are spoken by many people outside England, France, Portugal, Spain, Russia and Saudi Arabia. English, French and Portuguese are important media for cultural communication in contemporary Africa. Art, architecture, music, dance, literature (oral and written), social customs, culinary tastes, fashion, sporting interests—all these are ingredients of culture. When the expressions *Western culture* and *African culture* are used, all these aspects are presupposed.

Christianity is not a culture, but the Christian faith can be expressed and communicated only through cultural media. A Christian is a person who has accepted the Christian faith and made a firm decision to become a

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798 This Contribution is a revised excerpt from a chapter in J.N.K. Mugambi, “Christianity and African Cultural Heritage”, in *Christianity and African Culture* (Nairobi: Acton, 2002), ch. 8.

follower of Jesus Christ. To become a Christian is to accept Jesus Christ and His teachings as preserved in the Christian scriptures and maintained by the Church of one’s choice. The question as to what constitutes authentic Christian tradition is complicated by the existence of numerous Christian denominations. But there is no doubt that the need for cultural freedom and cultural identity has been an important factor in the establishment of Independent African Churches during the colonial period.  

The term *Church* can be loosely defined as the community of people who have accepted the Christian faith and are consciously bound together as a community by the commitment to implement the teaching of Jesus Christ in the world. Christianity affirms that Jesus of Nazareth is Christ the “Son of God”, but each church lives this faith according to its understanding of the demands of the Gospel. Each individual adult must decide for himself whether or not to become a Christian. Christians normally desire that their children grow up to become Christians, and each church has developed a system of nurturing children towards adult membership in the church. However, when the children of Christian parents grow up, they have to make up their minds whether or not to remain Christians. Their decision depends very much, on the impact which the Christian faith will have on them during childhood. No person can be forced to remain Christian against one’s will. This is one of the remarkable differences between commitment to Christianity and commitment to the African religious heritage. Just as an African cannot choose the ethnic community into which one is born, so it is almost impossible for one to dissociate one’s religious heritage from one’s total cultural background.

I. CULTURE AS THE MEDIUM OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITIES

Christianity cannot be expressed or communicated without a cultural medium. Any culture can be a medium for the expression and communication of the Christian faith. One missionary scholar likened the Christian faith to a jockey who rides a racing horse as long as the horse is a faster runner. When the horse loses its racing ability, the jockey chooses another horse, and by so doing he remains on the racecourse.  

Christianity began within the Jewish culture. That culture became incapable of

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801 The present author is indebted to Dr. Donald Jacobs, a Mennonite Missionary who delivered a public lecture on this analogy at Kenyatta College, Nairobi, in 1968.
sustaining the Christian faith because the leaders of Judaism believed that
the new faith was a threat to the Jewish culture. They tried to contain it
within Judaism, but Christianity broke off from Judaism and Jewish culture
to become one of the most dynamic religions of the world. Then it was
greatly influenced by Greek philosophy, without being swallowed by it. In
the fourth century Christianity became the popular religion of the Roman
Empire, after the conversion of Emperor Constantine. His Edict of Milan in
A.D. 313 made Christianity a tolerated religion all over the empire.
Christian leaders took advantage of this toleration and began to persecute
those who were critical of the Church.

The first great schism in Christianity occurred when Christians from
the eastern part of the empire refused to be subjected to the cultural,
intellectual, political and theological domination of leaders in the western
part of the empire. The Orthodox Churches, which grew independently
after this schism, have remained with their own cultural and liturgical
identity. The Catholic Church acquired a distinctly Roman character during
the Dark Ages and in the Medieval Period. Roman culture was imposed on
the peoples of Europe in the name of a Church. During the Reformation the
authority of the Pope was challenged, and many national churches
mushroomed in Europe. These in turn spread to North America with the
immigrants who sailed across the Atlantic in search of freedom and
fortune. The modern missionary movement has introduced Christianity to
Africa, Asia and the oceanic islands. During the modern missionary
enterprise Christianity was riding on western culture. Scholars are now
predicting that in the twenty-first century Christianity will be riding on the
cultures of Africa and Asia.

Each church portrays the culture in which it has developed. There is no
church not culturally bound in this way. The modern missionary enterprise
overlooked this fact when it introduced Christianity to Africa. There are no
“Christian Cultures”. But Christians in a culture can greatly influence that
culture. This happened in Europe and in North America. But in both those
continents there were, and still are, many people who are not Christians.
Lamentably, the modern missionary movement imposed western culture on
the peoples who were being evangelized on the assumption that western
culture was “Christian”, while other cultures were dismissed as “pagan”
and “heathen”. This was a theological error. The Ecumenical Movement in
the twentieth century has greatly contributed towards the correction of that
error. 802

802 The interested reader may consult publications of the World Council of
Churches, especially those by the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism
The Christian faith can be effectively expressed and communicated only in “culturally designed” media. If a missionary’s work in a culture other than his own is to be effective, he must learn to appreciate the culture of the people whom he wishes to evangelize. He must learn their language and appreciate their art, music, dance, architecture, ritual and all other aspects of that culture. He must identify himself with the community of those whom he is introducing to Jesus Christ. Then he must go further and translate his understanding of the Christian faith into the cultural terms familiar and traditional to his prospective converts. He must be willing to be changed. This is a very difficult task, but effective Christian mission demands nothing less. Saint Paul, one of the greatest missionaries in the history of Christianity, appreciated this demand, and lived up to it. To the Corinthians he said:

"... For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became one outside the law—not being without the law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessing."

It is regrettable that these profound insights from Paul were not heeded in the modern missionary enterprise. The effect of this theological error was that many African converts to the Christian faith were taught to accept the view that becoming a Christian meant adopting the cultural norms of foreign missionaries. Conversion was determined through behavioral norms, in terms of abandoning traditional African customs and adopting western ones. This resulted in a life of double standards among African converts. On the one hand, they accepted the norms introduced by the missionaries who saw nothing valuable in African culture. On the other hand, the converts could not deny their own cultural identity. They could not substitute their denominational belonging for their cultural and

(CWME) and the Unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies. The catalogue is available from the WCC Publications Office, P.O. Box 66, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.

803 Cor. 9:19-23.
religious heritage. Yet they could not become Europeans or Americans merely by adopting some aspects of the missionaries’ outward norms of conduct. 804

II. THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF MISSIONARY TEACHING AMONG AFRICAN CONVERTS

There is no doubt that the appeal of the Christian faith among many African converts was genuine and profound. In Jesus Christ they found new hope and clung to that hope in the face of great challenges which would otherwise have broken their lives, especially in situations of extreme oppression, exploitation and dehumanization during the colonial period. 805 But the affirmation that Jesus identifies himself with their suffering was one thing, and the practical demand of that faith was another. The genuineness of their faith cannot be doubted: only God knows the genuineness of a person’s faith. Nor should they be held fully responsible for thinking that their commitment to the Christian faith implied adopting western cultural norms. This was the teaching they had received from the missionary masters. Moreover, their Christian theological awareness was minimal; it was as much as they had received from catechetical classes and from sermons.

Academic schooling for most African converts did not go beyond the acquisition of basic literacy skills, only in their local languages. They could not, therefore, read theological works by theologians of the west, except the few which might have been translated into African languages. Critical theological reflection was not encouraged because the teaching of the missionaries was expected to be accepted without question, as “the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”. Missionaries in general ought to have been more modest and followed St. Paul’s example.

What should be the proper relationship between Christian identity and a Christian’s cultural identity? The dominant missionary opinion in the past has been that Christian identity is identical with western cultural and


805 This continued to be true for African Christians under the yoke of apartheid in South Africa and Namibia. See, e.g., Desmond Tutu, Crying in The Wilderness (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982); Allan Boesak, Farewell to Innocence (New York: Orbis Books, 1977).
religious heritage. We have seen that this is a mistaken view. Can an African accept the Christian faith and still retain African cultural identity without leading a life of double standards as was the case in the earlier part of the modern missionary enterprise? This is a question many African Christians ask today. If it is true that the Christian faith changes all cultures, then the answer to that question must be positive. Becoming a Christian has nothing to do with adopting the western or any other culture. Conversion is not acculturation. Conversion to the Christian faith demands that the convert identifies oneself with Jesus Christ and all that He stood for, and that this identification leads the convert to a fundamental change in attitude towards God, oneself and others. Conversion should help the convert to launch a critical examination of one’s own cultural background. It should lead the convert to review one’s personal life, towards a future guided by Jesus Christ. But conversion does not demand a wholesale denunciation or rejection of one’s cultural and religious heritage.

III. THE SUNDAY CULT

It has been argued above that Christianity is not a culture, although it was introduced in tropical Africa as if it were an integral part of western culture. In a situation of cultural and religious plurality such as that prevalent in Africa today, Christianity can easily become a cult, and this would be a distortion of the Gospel for which the Christian faith stands. Cults integrate the norm of conduct and belief to which all members of those cults must adhere irrespective of the general culture in which they live. Within one culture there can be many cults. Such was the situation in the Graeco-Roman Empire during the first three centuries of the Christian era. The Roman Empire officially regarded Christians as members of one cult among many. It was not until the conversion of Emperor Constantine that it became fashionable in the Roman Empire to become a nominal Christian.

A church becomes a cult when Christians isolate and insulate themselves from the challenges of the society in which their church has to make a practical impact in order to be faithful to the demands of the Christian mission. During the modern missionary enterprise, this often happened. The mission station became the centre of the new cult, with the resident missionary as its cult leader. The Christian faith among the African converts then became a Sunday affair. For six days they would live according to their traditional customs, and on Sunday they would wear the new garb they had been given. Dressed in these they would go to the mission station where they would sing new hymns and become involved in
a strange ritual. To many an African, the Christian faith appeared irrelevant. If it were concerned with what the convert did on Sunday, would it make any serious difference whether or not a person became a committed Christian? Classroom Religion and Sunday Religion are labels which fit this kind of Christian expression. But cultic expressions of the Christian faith are a distortion of the “Kingdom of God” which Jesus dramatically inaugurated. Jesus spent His public ministry interacting with the ordinary people, especially in the rural areas, rather than in the Temple at Jerusalem—as the leading rabbis did.

Today the same temptation of cultic detachment remains an approach Christians would do well to avoid. If Christians choose to detach themselves from the challenges of the society in which they live, the church to which they belong will appear to be a cultic club with exclusive membership, irrelevant to the needs of contemporary society. It is a matter of regret that this happens too often. Jesus mixed with the society of His earthly time, and by so doing He made a profound impact on its members and its culture. If the Church refuses to be soiled by the world in which it lives, then it will be like salt which has lost its taste (Matthew 5:13). Pietistic isolation is a disservice to Christian mission, because it encourages the impression, both within and outside the Church, that Christians are qualitatively “better” human beings than all other people. But Jesus teaches that no one is good except God alone. The fear of “syncretism” is not a convincing excuse for failing to be concerned and involved in solving the problems confronting contemporary society. The public ministry of Jesus is instructive on this point.

Christianity is a religion, which from its beginning sought to transcend particular cultures, in the sense that the Gospel (related to the Old Testament background) was not tied to the Hebrew cultural heritage. Jesus called for a new way of life in which all social barriers would be transcended, so that all people would regard each other as brothers and sisters and treat each other as such (e.g. Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8: 19-21; Matthew, 25: 31-46). This teaching was, and is, universally relevant. At the same time, however, Christianity throughout its history has become accepted and expressed within the cultural heritage of its followers in various parts of the world. As early as the Medieval Period, Christianity became so integrated in the European cultural heritage that the concept of “Christendom” developed. The modern missionary movement of the

nineteenth and twentieth century, which introduced Christianity to the interior of East Africa, grew within the background in which the Christian religion and western culture were incorporated to form a "Christian civilization". Thus when Christianity reached East Africa the distinction was not obvious, both to missionaries and to their converts, between the Gospel as a message with a universal challenge, and the particularly European cultural response to the challenge.

In the establishment of Christianity there have been at least three significant aspects worth noting. The first is the Gospel message whose core is the teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the gospels and passed on in the tradition of the Church. The second is the western culture, in which the Gospel was expressed for a long time before the rise of the modern missionary movement and the spreading of European and North American denominations—which formed a part of missionary activity in tropical Africa. The third aspect is the African heritage in the totality of which the African converts lived before their encounter with Christianity. This third aspect includes the African religious beliefs that embodied the African traditional understanding of physical and metaphysical reality.

The term culture, used in the broadest sense, refers to "that part of the total repertoire of human action and its products, which is socially, as opposed to genetically, transmitted". Only some aspects of culture are considered below. Christianity is a spiritual religion. The Bible is central as the basis of Christian doctrine. Reading it and interpreting its message are central aspects of Christian worship. In the introduction of the faith to Africa, it became necessary to teach the converts to read and write so that they might be able to read the Bible for themselves. The liturgies were also written, and the converts needed to be able to follow them in worship. Hence literary schooling became a very important aspect of missionary activity in Africa. Schools were built, in which prospective converts were taught to read and write, and having acquired these skills they would be introduced to the Bible. From these schools the first generation of catechists, teachers, pastors and evangelists were trained. In these schools

807 S.C. NEILL, A History of Christian Missions, pp. 61-139; NIDA, Customs and Cultures.
also basic skills were taught, which would enable the converts to become carpenters, masons, better farmers, dressers and so on.\textsuperscript{810}

This form of schooling was characteristically different from traditional African education.\textsuperscript{811} The school became an institution to which the interested Africans went in order to acquire literacy and the new skills which had become necessary in the new situation. At first, the schools did not attract much interest because it was seen as a distraction from the traditional way of life. As it became clearer that the traditional life could not go on unchanged, the school became more and more popular.\textsuperscript{812}

Traditionally there had been no institution equivalent to the school. Children would receive their basic instruction and training at home from their parents, grandparents and other relatives. At puberty they would be given further social education in the process of the ceremonies which they would undergo in connection with initiation. After marriage, the councils of elders would provide means by which men and women would increase their wisdom and experience, while participating in the decision-making process for the welfare of their community.\textsuperscript{813}

Often the mission schools preceded the church building. Classrooms would be used as initial meeting places for worship, until the congregation was large enough to necessitate the construction of a large and more special place of worship. Hence the school became a very important institution for the recruitment of converts during the early part of missionary activity.\textsuperscript{814}

This development led to the impression, among Africans, that becoming a Christian was synonymous with acquiring the skills of literacy.\textsuperscript{815} This was the case to begin with. Later on, however, the need for literacy grew beyond the urge for conversion to Christianity. It was soon realized that the


\textsuperscript{811} GOTTNEID, \textit{Church and Education}, pp. 5-26.


\textsuperscript{814} The missionary societies were concerned that the pupils admitted to the mission schools should belong to the sponsoring denominations. This situation has changed since Independence. See WELBOURN, \textit{East African Christian}, p. 84.

new employment opportunities needed basic literacy skills. These would be required in the school, and most of the schools were provided and managed by societies in their programs of evangelization.

The interests of the denominational schools and those of the pupils and parents were not necessarily congruent. For example, as far as the missionary societies were concerned, the school was an institution for both Christian instruction and the preparation of African pupils for new employment opportunities under colonial rule. The main interest of the pupils, and their parents, was to obtain the latter. This point is illustrated, for example, by the fact that as the demand for schooling grew, Africans did not mind which denominational schools they or their children attended, provided they would receive effective instruction to enable them to pass examinations which would qualify them for better-paid jobs. Hence it was not unusual for Protestant parents to take their children to Catholic schools if they were convinced that better instruction was available there. On the other hand, every pupil was expected to follow, at least outwardly, the denominational traditions of the school attended, irrespective of one’s previous denominational background. With the passing of examinations and employment as priorities, pupils would have to follow these denominational traditions and give a good impression to the missionary managers, even though one might not be religiously committed to them. The African catechists and evangelists, who occupied a central role in the early development of instruction in denominational schools, served the respective missionary societies that owned these schools. If a catechist or evangelist were dismissed from their services of one denomination, one could transfer allegiance and services to another missionary society, taking advantage of the competitive attitude that was the main feature of early missionary activity.

These two points illustrate that the view of African converts was that denominational allegiance was not of paramount importance as far as schooling was concerned. What mattered most was good training as the means to a job. For the missionaries, what mattered beyond general schooling and training was “good” Christian instruction to increase the number of converts to their respective denominations. Reading and writing were not part of the cultural heritage of the peoples in the interior of East Africa. The introduction of Christianity was accompanied by the introduction of literacy. The African cultural and religious heritage was passed on orally from generation to generation, and the wisdom of the ancestors was conserved not in written books but in songs and oral
traditions.\textsuperscript{816} Hence the coming of Christianity as a “Religion of the Book” was a new religious experience as well as a new cultural innovation.

The skills of reading and writing which were learned at the mission stations and mission schools became useful not only for the new religious purposes, but also for the general adaptation to the new cultural situation which had developed. Although not everyone could read and write, the literate Africans were able to learn from books other than the Bible, especially when they became proficient in languages such as English, French and Latin. Their acquired knowledge, in addition to that which they had received in their traditional up-bringing, enabled them to become leaders in the cultural changes that were already taking place.\textsuperscript{817} Literacy has continued to be an important felt need in Africa as one of the basic tools necessary for development. In view of this fact, literacy, though it came with Christianity and was at first provided mainly by missionary societies as a means of evangelization, became a distinct factor worthy to be considered on its own with regard to cultural change in Africa. Those who could read the Bible and the Catechism could also read other books. Those who could write sermons could also write other things, and those who could count the number of converts they had made, could also utilize their arithmetical knowledge in other spheres of life.

IV. CHURCH AND FAMILY

Christianity came with the teaching that the Church is to be understood as a new family whose head and centre is Jesus Christ. This new family is not based on kinship, clans or ethnic identity. Neither is it based on racial origins or social status. Primarily, it is founded upon faith in Jesus Christ, and its cohesion is maintained with the Church whose individual members are expected to live according to the new relationships as proclaimed by the gospel.\textsuperscript{818} The early missionaries first recruited to the mission station young unmarried individuals and instructed them according to the missionary


\textsuperscript{817} Leadership especially in the Church activities is discussed by MUGA, African Response, ch.4; Paul M. MILLER, Equipping for Ministry in East Africa (Dodoma: Central Tanganyika Press, 1969).

emphasis on the individual salvation of souls. A problem arose when these unmarried converts felt a need to get married. If they could not find Christian spouses, what were they to do? The most feasible solution was for the missionaries to develop the concept of the “Christian Home” and urge converts to encourage their spouses to become Christians if they were not already converts.\(^{819}\)

Marriage was and continues to be regarded as a very important aspect in the development of the Church, in the sense that the socialization of children in the life of the Church would begin at home.\(^{820}\) Hence the concept of a “Christian home” became a new idea in African cultural life.\(^{821}\) Christian homes were to become the nuclei of the new wider family, the Church. This did not always work, because the children of the converts would have to choose when they grew up whether or not to follow the faith of their parents. Marriage and Christianity came to be understood as neo-local, so that the wedded couple would set up a new home, leaving the household of their parents.\(^{822}\) The basic family unit became the husband, his one wife, and their children if any were born.

In the African cultural heritage, the marriage between two individuals was understood as a means of initiation or cementing the union of the households and clan from which the couple belonged. Hence, the individual man and woman intending to marry needed the approval of their respective parents and relatives. The established family sanctions regarding marriage had to be observed if a marriage was to be allowed to take place. For example, no man or woman belonging to an exogamous clan would be allowed to marry within his own clan, no matter how distant the blood-relationship, and no matter how strong the affection might be.\(^{823}\)


\(^{820}\) For example, counselling about marriage and the socialisation of the children was one of the primary concerns of the Family Life Education Programme of the National Christian Council of Kenya during the 1970s and 1980s. See also, R.S. Ndingi Mwana a’ Nzeki, “The Church and Family Life” in Target, 236 (21st May, 1977).

\(^{821}\) Edwin Weaver & Irene Weaver, The Uyo Story (Elkhart, in: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1970), 66; Oliver, The Missionary Factor.


transactions of marriage were carried out at two levels, first between the couple, and then between the households. Relatives and age-mates wanted to feel like they were participating at the second level of the marriage transactions. Moreover, marriage was understood as a process taking many years to complete. The relationship between the man’s household and that of his wife or wives was expected to continue without end in normal circumstances— which included the birth of children.824

Among African Christians, the two concepts of “family” are maintained. At one level they belong to the ecclesial family which cuts across kinship ties and unites peoples of varied backgrounds in one faith and common ecclesial life. At another level and at the same time, they belong to their kinship groups, although the social links in the extended family may not be as strong as they used to be. Kinship ties, if they are known, are acknowledged irrespective of whether the relatives are Christians or not. Thus it is recognized that kinship relations are a social fact which a person cannot choose, whereas one becomes a member of the ecclesial family through his option to become a Christian.825

The concept of monogamous Christian homes as the nuclei of the ecclesial family presented significant challenges for African churches. Although not all marriages were polygamous, the churches had to decide whether or not the men and women living in polygamous union would be allowed to become members of the church. The common rule was that the husband should abandon all wives except the first one. This would mean the future welfare of the wives and children that might be abandoned would be shaken. There was no easy solution to this problem. This issue has continued to be discussed in the churches as an important pastoral challenge.826 It should be noted, however, that the question of admitting into church membership converts living in polygamous families is a


825 For a discussion on “social fact”, see MITCHELL, A Dictionary of Sociology, p. 76.

distinct issue from the suggestion that polygamy be an acceptable general principle.

V. RITES OF PASSAGE

The rites of passage are the communal ceremonies performed as an individual passes from one stage to another: at birth, adolescence, adulthood and death. They are expressions of the understanding and expectations of communities regarding the role of the individual in society.

a) Birth: In the African heritage there were rituals of thanksgiving and welcoming the new-born child. The child would be named according to the established customs of the community. For example, a child might be named after an important event that had taken place around the time of birth, after the season or time of day in which birth took place. Also, a child might be named after a relative in the family of its father or mother. Among the communities in which the latter custom was followed, there were some guidelines to indicate which of the relatives would be named, and which order the children would be given the names of such relatives. The birth of a child was a great joy to the whole family and the whole clan. Relatives and friends would come to visit the mother and the child for many months after delivery, and there would be much feasting to express that joy, congratulate the mother and help restore her health by bringing food and drinks, and temporarily relieving her of the work at home.

The traditional rituals concerning the birth of a child were eventually different from those which came with Christianity. Prayers of thanksgiving, for example, would include reference to the deity, spirits and ancestors. The ancestors would be beseeched to keep the child healthy and remove any curses which might negatively affect his life. They would be requested to bless the child and guide him to grow in wisdom, courage, generosity and in any other values which were cherished by the community.

Christianity introduced new rituals concerning the growth of the individual in the context of the Church, from birth to death. With regard to birth, Christian parents would be expected to take their new-born child to the Church for thanksgiving. The ceremony of thanksgiving was an


828 Birth as a rite of passage is discussed in MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, pp. 112-118.

829 In the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* the ceremony is called *Churching*. 
expression of appreciation to God for the gift of the child, for its safe delivery and health condition of the mother. In the ceremony the child and its parents would be committed to God’s care and guidance. Prayers would be made that the child might grow up to be a faithful Christian who would become an active member of the Church. Unlike the traditional thanksgiving—which was spontaneous and impromptu, the Christian liturgy would normally be written, and the parents would be guided through it by the priest. Their responses through the service would be indicated in the liturgy. This ceremony continues to be an aspect of the life of the Church, and in some denominations it is linked with the practice of infant baptism.

Infant baptism is practiced as the wish of the parents that the child will grow up within the setting of the Church. A “god-parent” is chosen to become the sponsor of the child at the ceremony, and takes the vows of initiation into the Church on the child’s behalf. The “god-parent” is expected to ensure that the child whom he has sponsored for baptism will be brought up in Christian instruction and that when the child grows up he will learn the catechism of the Church and be confirmed as a full member. Baptism as a Christian sacrament is more than what has been stated above. According to the Anglican catechism, for example, “god-parents” make three promises to God on behalf of the infant being baptized:

i) that while growing up the child will renounce the devil and fight against evil;

ii) that he will believe and hold fast the Christian faith and put his trust on Christ as Lord and Savior; and

iii) that he will obediently keep God’s commandments and serve Him faithfully, all the days of his life. At confirmation, the child is expected to express that same ready acceptance publicly before the Church.

This ceremony of infant baptism is also associated with the giving of new names. In the beginning, the names given at baptism were normally those of biblical characters and saints such as Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Peter,

830 The god-parent serves an educative role similar to that of a sponsor in the initiation rite, guiding the child to maturity of faith in the new Christian community. For detailed discussion on this point see H.G.G. HERKLOTS, *The Call of God: An Explanation of the Revised Catechism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1962), 91-100.
Paul, Augustine, Anthony, Anselm. The idea behind this practice was that those who were baptized would be frequently reminded to order their lives in a Christian way, following the example of the characters whose names they had been given. Later on, however, this principle of choosing such names was not rigidly followed, and normally European names were allowed. The popular consequence of this practice has been that baptism is often understood more as a re-naming ceremony than as a central sacrament of the Church. The concept of “Christian names” seems to have overshadowed the sacramental significance of baptism in the sense that the acquisition of a noticeably new name came to be popularly understood as a mark of becoming a Christian.\(^{831}\) Some of the customs concerning birth have continued as part of the life of African Christians. The naming of children as discussed above is an illustrative example of such continuation. A child born of Christian parents may have two names, one of which will have been chosen according to the traditional customs, and the second given at baptism.

\textit{b) Initiation:} Adolescence, marked outwardly by the physical changes of puberty, was another stage at which a rite of passage would be performed. The community would prepare the adolescent socially, psychologically and religiously for the next stage of growth in the life of the community—adulthood. In the initiation into adulthood, the adolescents (both boys and girls) would be guided through a series of experiences contrived for that purpose, to learn the implication of the puberty changes. One was expected by the community to conduct oneself responsibly, without degrading oneself and one’s family. The rite would include a physical ordeal which the adolescent was expected to go through courageously as proof of readiness to leave childhood behind and enter adulthood with maturity. In some communities, for example, circumcision was practiced as part of the initiation rite.\(^{832}\)


\(^{832}\) The importance of such practices is continually diminishing with social change in African communities. The cultural conflict resulting from the disregard by missionaries of African initiation rites is portrayed by NGUGI WA THIONG’O (James NGUGI) in \textit{The River Between} (London: Heinemann, 1966). See also, J. KENYATTA, \textit{Facing Mount Kenya} (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938); PEIL, \textit{Consensus and Conflict}. 

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The fundamental significance of initiation for the total African cultural life was not fully realized by most missionaries. For some of them, the practices were considered to be unnecessary ordeals, causing great suffering to the adolescents. In African traditional life, however, the education and training which was given during initiation was vital for the community’s maintenance of its self-understanding, and for providing every individual with the opportunity to learn what the community expected of him.\(^{833}\) Initiation was understood differently in Christianity, in the sense that the admission into full membership of the Church did not involve any physical ordeals, although there were catechetical procedures for preparation of converts towards maturity in the Christian faith. The test for readiness for confirmation in the Church was the extent to which the converts understood the doctrines outlined in the catechism, and their willingness to conduct themselves according to the expectations of the Church. Thus, whereas initiation in the African cultural heritage was an inevitable stage in the social development of the individual, in Christianity it would be undergone only by those who in the opinion of the catechist and the priest were doctrinally prepared. The preparation in Christianity mainly involved the recitation of the doctrines stated in the catechism.

Adult baptism and confirmation came to be the Christian rituals through which the converts would be progressively initiated into full membership in the Church.\(^{834}\) In the main Protestant denominations, only after confirmation would the convert be welcome to participate in the Holy Communion. The principle behind this was that only after going through the catechetical instruction of baptism and confirmation could the converts be able to comprehend the meaning of the Eucharist—the mystery of the suffering of Jesus Christ for the salvation of mankind and the benefits accruing from it.

In traditional life, initiation was a long process involving the whole community and lasting at least several weeks. It was the integral part of the life of the community. The youth of a particular age group would be initiated into adulthood together. Although the traditional process of initiation was not adopted into the life of African churches, African Christians have continued to appreciate the importance of preparing their children for responsible and mature adulthood. However, social change and development of modern education—in which parents can be with their

school children for only a quarter of a year during the school holidays—are factors that make the counseling of adolescence, both in school and at home, a great challenge. 835

c) Marriage: In the African cultural heritage, marriage was one of the most important marks of social adulthood. A man or woman would not be socially recognized as a grown-up without being married, no matter how old he or she might be chronologically. 836 As mentioned above, marriage was a social concern in which the kin of the two bonding families were fully involved. The process of marriage was characterized by rites of transactions through which the marrying individuals were welcomed into social adulthood. Tokens in kind (dowry) were exchanged as part of these transactions, to cement the social relationships and seal the union. Such goods were at first mistakenly considered by some missionaries and anthropologists to be “bride-price” implying that African marriage involved the “buying” of individuals. Marriage in African tradition was very different from slavery. The importance of marriage as a rite of passage supports this statement. 837

Procreation was very important in the African concept of marriage. A marriage in which children were not born was considered to be problematic, and sometimes a bride might be returned to her parents for such a reason. Polygamy was potentially allowed by custom, especially if an earlier marriage did not produce children, or if the children born in an earlier marriage were only girls. The birth of boys was considered to be very important, both for inheritance and for the defense of the community. It was also important as the means to perpetuate and expand family or clan. 838 Sometimes polygamy was practiced simply because a man could afford it.

Christianity came with a new understanding of marriage. There were three main purposes of marriage according to the Christian teaching. Procreation was one of them. Secondly, marriage was understood as the accepted means of establishing basic companionship among adults of the

835 E.g., this problem was one of the primary concerns of the School and Community Conference held at Limuru Conference Centre, November 1976. Various aspects of the problem are discussed in PEIL, Consensus and Conflict.
837 The issue is discussed by SHORTER, African Culture, pp. 167-72. See also, RADCLIFFE-BROWN & FORDE, African Systems.
two sexes. Basing this teaching on the account of creation in the book of Genesis (Chapters 1 & 2), Christianity emphasized that in the beginning God created man and woman to be companion and helpers to one another, and to avoid loneliness. Thirdly, marriage was understood in Christianity as a means of avoiding sin. Adultery was forbidden in Christian teaching, and to make provision for the avoidance of this sin, monogamous marriage was instituted.839

Procreation was considered as the subsidiary to the other two purposes of marriage according to Christian teaching. Thus, childlessness was not considered grounds for dissolving a marriage, nor was polygamy allowed because an earlier marriage was childless. In contrast, the African cultural heritage placed great importance on children, and this was an important factor on which the success of a marriage would depend.

The Christian wedding was introduced as a new experience in African cultural and religious life. It was performed in the church, following a liturgy that was new to African religious practice. In the Catholic Church, matrimony was understood as one of the seven sacraments.840

African Christians accepted the Christian teaching about marriage and celebrated Christian weddings as the climax of the social marriage rite. At the same time, however, they did not entirely abandon the traditional understanding of marriage. There were several reasons for this. A Christian convert who wanted to get married to a woman or man belonging to a non-Christian family, would be expected to go through all the traditional marriage transactions. For example, a man would be expected to contribute goods in kind (dowry), such as honey and livestock to seal the marriage. If he was determined to marry, he would have no option but to comply with the customs, although his Christian instruction might have taught him that such customs were heathen.841 Furthermore, African Christians, though recognizing themselves as members of the Church, did not and could not entirely sever their ties with their kin.

Considering that not all the kith and kin of African Christians embraced Christianity, a Christian wanting to get married peacefully needed to gain the approval of his relatives as well as that of the Church. Consequently, the Christian wedding came to be only one aspect of the

841 For further discussion, WELBOURN, East African Christian, 116-129; SHORTER, African Culture, pp. 156-195.
African marriage rite. The second aspect was the traditional one, in which the kith and kin of the marrying couple would celebrate the inaugurated relationship—irrespective whether Christian or not, would participate in this aspect of the wedding. The dual celebration of the marriage rite is an illustrative instance of the African Christians’ adaptation of their understanding of the Gospel to their cultural heritage. In this way they realize their double faithfulness—to their kith and kin, and to the unity of mankind as embodied in Christianity—in the Church centered on Jesus Christ.

Consummation after the Christian wedding was considered to be the completion of the marriage contract. A marriage that had not been consummated could be nullified, but once consummation had taken place, divorce was not possible, since such allowance, according to the Christian teaching, would reduce the couple to fornicators, or to adulterers if either of them chose to marry again.842 Moreover, the Christian wedding came as a new cultural experience in which the bridal party wore new clothes indicative of the new culture; new foods and drinks were served at the celebration, such as wedding cakes (and baked bread), rice and tea.

From the basic observations made above regarding the marriage rite, it follows that even without the contemporary emphasis on the indigenization of Christianity,843 African Christians have already initiated ways of dealing with the problem of accepting the new religion in the context of their culture. Christian doctrines and worship are accepted, but at the same time some aspects of African culture, which African Christians consider necessary, are maintained in their way of life.

d) Death: Both in Christianity and African cultural heritage, the death of an individual causes great concern to the community of which he has been a member and in which he has been living. This is especially so if the deceased had favorable relations with the members of the community. Rituals are organized for the expression of this concern. In African tradition, the death of an elderly popular individual was felt to be a great loss to the community. Funeral rituals expressed this feeling of sorrow and loss and emphasized that the physical death was not the end of the person’s existence. It was believed that the dead person would continue to influence the lives of the living relatives. In accordance with this belief, it was considered essential that those who were physically alive should continue

842 HASTINGS, Christian Marriage, p. 86.
to conduct themselves in such a way as to maintain peaceful and healthy relations with one another and with the departed ones. The latter relationship would be maintained by observing strict and established customs of the community, pouring libation in remembrance of the departed, singing praises to them and naming children after them. The departed would be consulted occasionally through the elders and the diviners to find out their will for the living community. It was feared that any offence to the departed would bring suffering and misfortune to the relatives and to the community as a whole.\footnote{For further discussion see, Mb\textsc{i}ti, \textit{African Religious Philosophy}, pp. 75-91, 162.}

If a deceased person had many children and had been living according to the established customs of the community, there was also an expression of joy because he had not departed without leaving some descendants. The continuation of the family lineage was felt to be obligatory; hence, marriage and procreation were primary responsibilities that must be fulfilled before a person reached old age. The death of an unmarried person was not regarded to be as great a loss as that of one who had fulfilled this obligation. Thus, the rituals concerned with the death of accepted members of the community were a mixture of sorrow and joy—sorrow that the community would miss physically one of its members, and joy that the deceased had fulfilled his obligations to the community according to custom.\footnote{Mb\textsc{i}ti, \textit{African Religious Philosophy}, p. 84.}

Christianity came with new rituals for the burial of Christians. The liturgy for burial reflected the Christian beliefs in eternal life, resurrection and the communion of saints, as stated in the Apostles’ Creed. The Christian funeral was a new cultural experience in Africa in which texts from the Bible were read and new hymns sung. A new theological understanding of the destiny of man was articulated, expressing the conviction that after physical death a faithful Christian would enter the Kingdom of God to live with Him eternally while the unfaithful would be condemned to eternal suffering in hell.

In contemporary African Christian life there is an overlap of African cultural heritage and Christian teaching. The death of a Christian is felt to be a loss to the Church, and the congregation expresses this feeling at the Christian funeral. There is also the affirmation of the Christian belief, that physical death is not the end of human existence—God in Jesus Christ has promised eternal life to humankind. At the same time, the relatives of the deceased and the community of which one has been a member feel the loss caused by the death. They feel it both as Christians and as members of his
family and community. Although some African Christians may not conduct the traditional death rituals, such as ritual of cleansing, all continue to feel the presence of the deceased long after physical death.

VI. CHRISTIAN AND AFRICAN SYMBOLISM

Christianity came with new symbols\(^{846}\) that embodied its basic doctrines and theology. In this section several of these are considered in the light of their theological significance in Christianity and according to what they may mean in the context of the Church in Africa.

\(a\) \textit{The Cross}: This is one of the most significant Christian symbols in the life of the Church, being a visible sign to remind Christians and other people of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the salvation of humanity.\(^{847}\) The symbol embodies the Christian belief that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, so that through Him the estranged relationship between God and man might be restored. God took the initiative to re-establish the relationship which man, through the sin of disobedience, had broken. The cross is also a constant reminder that Jesus conquered death, and in the resurrection mankind became assured of eternal life for all those who believe the Gospel and became followers of this way, as exemplified by Jesus Christ.

The cross also embodies the Christian belief in God's gracious forgiveness, which is freely extended to all those who repent and believe the Gospel. The Kingdom of God, as a present experience and an eternal promise, is open to all those who choose to follow the way of the cross. Since the Apostolic Period, Christians have been called people of the "Way of the Cross" (Mark 8:34, 38, Acts 9:2, 19:9, 24:14). Thus the cross is a very loaded theological symbol in the life of the Church. It embodies the Christian belief in the triune of God, whose presence is experienced by the


believer through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For many centuries, it has been a Christian tradition to place a cross on Church buildings, at the altar, at the pulpit and at other conspicuous places. In many denominations it is part of the clerical dress. Hence it is one of the most common symbols in all the various strands of Christianity.

Before the coming of Christianity the cross was not a religiously significant symbol among African communities. Hence, the widespread use of it in the Church made the cross one of the most visible distinguishing characteristics of the presence of Christianity in Africa. Wherever the Church has been established, one can notice the presence without necessarily being told about it, by observing the use of this symbol on church buildings, clerical dress and on Christian graves. The cross has continued to be the mark of identity for Christian churches all over the world. Although its cultural origin was not in Africa, it has come to be accepted by African Christians for the deep theological meaning that it signifies.

b) Bread and Wine: The Eucharist is one of the central sacraments of the Church. In it the Christian community enacts the Last Supper which Jesus Christ had with His disciples just before His crucifixion. During that occasion Jesus, pointing to His death and resurrection, offered Himself as the Bread of Life. The Bread in that meal signified His body tortured and broken for the salvation of mankind. The wine signified His blood, shed for the same purpose. He commended His disciples to enact that event as the central ritual of the Christian community. Hence the Eucharist came to signify and embody the new Covenant which inaugurated a new era of faith and life, unified in Jesus Christ. Thus bread and wine, which were elements basic to the staple food for the people of Palestine in the time of Jesus, acquired symbolic significance for the early Christian community, and for the Church throughout its history to the present time. This sacrament—

848 MBITI, African Religious Philosophy, p. 90, has noted that the Gikuyu shaved children in the form of a cross during rituals designed to keep off malicious spirits. (This symbolism was not connected with Christianity). Among the Embu, the emphasis in this custom fell on the incompleteness of the shaving, rather than on the design made on the scalp. Mbiti’s suggestion to link this custom with Christianity has been criticised by Prof. Ali MAZRUI, “Epilogue”, in Okot P’BITEK, African Religions in Western Scholarship (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970), 126.
sometimes called “The Lord’s Supper”, “The Last Supper”, “Eucharist” or “Holy Communion”—also reminds Christians that animal sacrifices, or any other offerings to God, are no longer necessary for restoration of the estranged relations between God and humankind. Jesus Christ offered Himself for that purpose, once and for all. Through His crucifixion and resurrection, humanity had freely received the gift of salvation and became reunited with God.\footnote{For fuller discussion, see MBITI, \textit{New Testament Eschatology}, pp. 101-105; Moltmann, \textit{The Crucified God}; Paul TILLICH, “Existence and the Christ”, in \textit{Systematic Theology}, vol. II (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957), 150-165.} For the Churches that give prominence to apostolic tradition, the Eucharist is the centre of Christian worship, expressing the experienced reality of the Incarnation, and constantly reminding Christians of God’s presence among His people. It is the climax of the Church’s corporate life.

The use of bread and wine in the Eucharist came as a new cultural and religious experience for African peoples. In their traditional life, Africans made animal sacrifices and other offerings to the deity, spirits and ancestors. There was no teaching about a personal savior, nor was there a belief in personal salvation such as taught in Christianity.\footnote{MBITI, “Some African Concepts of Christology”, p. 60.} African Christians in the churches that grew directly out of the modern missionary movement accepted the teaching about the Eucharist, and adopted bread and wine as the elements with which to enact the central sacrament of the Church. Whereas in the Apostolic Period bread and wine were a common diet, in African Christianity these elements came as a new cultural experience so that some Christians would taste bread and wine only at Holy Communion.

c) Water: The ritual of baptism was another new cultural and religious experience in Africa. Baptism as conducted by John the Baptist and by the Apostles in the Early Church was by total immersion. It was a very significant ritual, symbolizing publicly the ceremonial washing of the penitent sinner in the clean water of the river Jordan which, rising in the lofty mountains of Lebanon, drained into the Dead Sea. As the river flowed to the sea without outlet, its waters would symbolically wash the old life out of those being baptized, and then they would continue to live according to the new teaching.\footnote{For the symbolic significance of water in the Bible, see, for example, J.A. MOTYER, “Baptism” in DOUGLAS, \textit{The New Bible Dictionary}; and J.B. TAYLOR, “Water”, in DOUGLAS, \textit{The New Bible Dictionary}.} Jesus was baptized by John in that river, and from
African Christianity

that example His followers continued the practice of baptism. He advised Nicodemus that unless a person was “born again” with water and the spirit he could not enter the Kingdom of God. 854

As the Church continued to mould its theology, baptism became the central sacrament and the ritual by which converts would be initiated into life and membership of the Church. Some churches today practice baptism by total immersion as in the Early Church, while others sprinkle water over the head of the convert and then declare him baptized in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Whatever procedure of baptism is followed, water is the important symbol.

In traditional African life, there was ritual washing in which water was accorded symbolic meaning. For example, a person who touched a corpse would have to be ritually cleansed before he could rejoin the normal life of the community. 855 Water was considered to be a very important element, essential to the life of the individual and the community, and also for the life of the livestock. It was against custom to deny a thirsty person some water to drink. 856 African Christians, especially during the early period of missionary activity, understood baptism to be very significant in their lives. They were prepared to go through several years of catechetical instruction in order to be baptized and become members of the Church. 857 The ritual was also linked to the giving of new names, especially those of biblical characters and of saints. The water was accorded new symbolic significance when Christianity was introduced in Africa. In the ritual of baptism, the baptized convert was considered to have been “washed” of all aspects of the old existence, and was therefore expected to abandon the traditional customs of his community. It has been noted, however, that this missionary expectation was not fully realized because African Christians

854 John 3:1-13. It should be remembered that the challenge of Jesus to Nicodemus was not that he should go through a ritual or experience a charismatic trance. Rather, the challenge was for him to repent of the old life and enter the new Christian community founded on love rather than pharisaic legalism.


856 This custom prevailed in many cultures, even non-African ones. E.g., Jesus referred to it in His teaching, Matt. 25:35.

continued to hold some of the traditional ideas although they would not publicly participate in traditional ritual.\textsuperscript{858}

d) **Blood:** According to the teaching of Christianity, the blood of Jesus Christ was shed in the final sacrifice for the salvation of all sinners. The coming of Christianity to East Africa thus brought a new way of re-establishing the relationship between God and man. An illustrative example of the acceptance of this new teaching by African Christians is a chorus, which is very popular within the East African Revival Movement. The chorus expresses the joy of a Christian after being cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{859} In the New Testament, Jesus was referred to as the “Lamb who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29-30). His blood became the “Blood of the new covenant” (Matt. 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20). In the Old Testament, the blood of the sacrificial lamb symbolized the Old Covenant between God and His people, and this understanding remained central to the Old Testament religion since the exodus from Egypt. The incarnation became the New Covenant in which animal, human or any other form of sacrifice was no longer necessary. To Africans, the practice of offering sacrifices was not new, what was new was the teaching that Jesus had shed His own blood, making the last and only necessary sacrifice for man’s salvation.

\section*{Conclusion}

In view of the observations made in this chapter, the establishment of Christianity in tropical Africa can be considered to have been a double-sided process. On the other hand, there was \textit{conversion} in which some individuals, having encountered Christianity, chose to follow its new teaching and adopt a new way of life. Catechetical instruction was the main means through which the converts were prepared for initiation into the fellowship of the new faith. They were taught new doctrines, and after being tested, to ensure that they could at least recite them, the converts would be admitted into the full membership of the Church. In this sense they were converted from their African religious heritage to Christianity. On the other hand, the acceptance of the new doctrines in conversion


\textsuperscript{859} One version of that chorus in English has the following words: “Glory Alleluyia, Glory, Glory to the Lamb; Oh! the cleansing blood of Jesus; Glory, Glory to the Lamb”. This is sung in many East African Languages.
implied the adoption of a new way of life, which would correspond to these beliefs. The translation of Christian teaching into practical living could not be done without cultural reference and cultural interaction—acculturation.

It has been observed above that while African Christians accepted the basic Christian teachings almost without debate,\(^{860}\) they did not necessarily abandon their traditional values and ideas. Although they may have publicly detached themselves from traditional rituals and practices, the positive values and ideas embodied in those expressions remained part of the African Christian experience. The establishment of Christianity in tropical Africa was also a process of both conversion and acculturation.\(^{861}\) African Christians, through encounter and interaction with the new religion already expressed in terms of another culture, acquired and developed a new way of life which was distinct from, but also related to, both the old (local) and the new (foreign) cultural backgrounds.

\(^{860}\) Contrasting the modern missionary movement’s activity in Africa with the spreading of Christianity in the Graeco-Roman world, the establishment of the church in the nineteenth century was characterised by cultural, rather than theological and philosophical controversies in East Africa. Theological critique of the modern missionary enterprise is only just beginning, and this volume is a contribution to the discussion.

\(^{861}\) Acculturation is used in this section as the process whereby an individual or group acquired the cultural characteristics of another through direct contract and interaction”. A.H. RICHMOND, “Acculturation” in MITCHELL, A Dictionary of Sociology. The problem of conversion and acculturation in the context of East African cultural and religious heritage, is satirically portrayed by Okot p’BITEK, in Song of Lawino and Song Of Ocol (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1966 & 1967).