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AFRICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE LIGHT OF THE THEOLOGY OF INCULTURATION

Abstract

Christ's redemptive work on earth was carried out within human cultural environment and societal experiences. This is the import of the *'Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us'* (cf. Jn 1:14). As such, Vatican II Council's *world church* vision suggests an ecclesiology that places much emphasis on the local Church with its cultural tinctures. In other words, the proclamation of the Gospel, involves, in its very nature, the development of a process of "inculturation" since the Gospel cannot be preached in a vacuum. This paper is anchored on the inseparability of human culture from his identity as a person. It therefore posits that proper and more rewarding evangelization of any group of people can be better achieved when such is done from the background of their cultural identity. This is the basis for theology of inculturation which deals with the effort of the Church to integrate the Gospel of Christ within the ambience of different cultural settings. The ideas expressed here come mainly from *Igbo* cultural background. The concept of African world views sets the tone of the paper.

Keywords: African ontology, Culture, Inculturation, Worldviews, Traditional Religion, Evangelization, cultural identity, theology of inculturation.

Streszczenie

Zbawcze dzieło Chrystusa na ziemi zostało dokonane w konkretnym czasie i miejscu ludzkiej historii i w konkretnych uwarunkowaniach społecznych. Prawda ta wynika z faktu, że „Słowo stało się ciałem i zamieszkało pośród nas” (J 1, 14). W związku z tym Sobór Watykański II ukazując wizję Kościoła powszechnego postuluje takie postrzeganie eklezjologii, które kładzie nacisk na Kościoły lokalne ze swoimi uwarunkowaniami kulturowymi. Innymi słowy, głoszenie Ewangelii zakłada, że swej natury, rozwój procesu inkulturacji, ponieważ Ewangelia nie może być głoszona w kulturowej próżni. Punktem wyjścia niniejszego artykułu jest założenie, że

nie można oddzielać ludzkiej kultury od pojmowania człowieka jako osoby. W związku z tym należy założyć, że właściwa i bardziej skuteczna ewangelizacja jakiegokolwiek grupy ludzi może się dokonać, kiedy uwzględnia ona jej kulturową tożsamość. To jest podstawą dla teologii inkulturacji, która zajmuje się wysiłkami Kościoła na rzecz umiejscowienia Ewangelii Chrystusowej w ramach odmiennych uwarunkowań kulturowych. W artykule poruszono powyższe zagadnienie w kontekście środowiska kulturowego tworzonego przez ludzi określanych jako *Igbo* (jedna z trzech największych grup etnicznych w Nigerii).

Słowa kluczowe: ontologia afrykańska, kultura, inkulturacja, światopogląd, religie tradycyjne, ewangelizacja, tożsamość kulturowa, teologia inkulturacji

I. Introduction to the basic ideas expressed in this paper

In his interpretation of the progressive nature of the Church, Karl Rahner noted in these words that:

there were three great epochs in Church history: the first one was a short period of Jewish Christianity, followed by the second, much longer period of the Church in a particular cultural group, namely of Hellenism and European cultures and civilization. With Vatican II Council, the Church has entered into the third period where the Church's living space is the world, and has begun the transition from Western Church to a Universal Church¹.

This idea of the universality of the Church (*Ecclesia universalis*), goes a long way in presenting the Church as inclusive of all races, colours and cultures. Indeed, the mission of the Church is placed in the rightful perspective of Christ's injunction to the disciples; 'of going out to the whole world, proclaiming the Good News' (Matt. 28:19-21). Moreover, Christ's own redemptive work on earth was carried out within human cultural environment. However, the missiological paradigm which the first evangelizers used on African continent left much to be desired in terms of their appreciation of the inherent cultures which they met. As such, most of the ingredients of the African cultures were erroneously interpreted and were seen as incompatible with Christianity. More than a century of their acceptance of the Gospel, and with the insight of Vatican II Council, African Christians have continued grooving on the loss of their cultural identity and have continued to ask the question whether those cultural alignment were really indicative of their unbelief in the Supreme Being. It is on

¹ K. Rahner, *Basic Theological Interpretation of the Vatican II Council*, London 1981, p. 81.

this note therefore, that the advent of theology of inculturation has been seen as a welcome development by African theologians. The aim of this work is to show how proper interpretation of the theology of inculturation can help deepen and strengthen the faith of African Christians. And to do this, I felt the need that the knowledge of African worldviews with its ontological understanding will give us leverage in understanding his cultural identity and the best way to allow the Gospel of Christ to be fully integrated and incarnated in African Christian lives.

II. African Worldviews

To say that Africa is too large a continent, is merely stating the obvious. And because of this very fact, our perception of the universe and ontological understanding of the cosmic world may be coloured with some subtle differences, the high percentage of uniformity notwithstanding. However, Africans view history as a *continuum*, consisting of a past, a present and a future, all inseparably linked together. This historical consciousness recognizes continuity and change, order and purpose within the framework of man and his environment, man and the gods, man and his ancestors. The present is never wholly liberated from the past in that through rituals, the credibility of old verities and institutions is constantly being re-enacted and validated. This dependence on the past can be explained in terms of the reverence accorded to the ancestors, the founders of the clan, the progenitor of the ethnic group or the kingdom, who may often indeed be elevated in the group's historical consciousness to the level of gods². This patterned way of life has given an average African an identity different from any other continent. Moreover, their worldview always reveals their fundamental religious commitments as well as their ontological linkages to their collective identity. It is from this angle that the African ontological and theological vision can best be understood and appreciated. "In African world vision too, man is the centre of the universe full of spiritual and material forces. God is the first for he is the Creator of all other forces including man"³.

For the "Igbos", (*one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria*), the world is an arena of two entities – the seen and the unseen (man and God the creator with other spiritual forces). In line with this belief, Ekwunife opined that Igbo world is principally a world of two interacting realities – the spiritual and material, each impinging on the other. It is both the world of spiritual beings and the world of man with other animate and inanimate beings. In this

² Cf. R. Olaniyan, *African History and Culture: an overview*, in: *African History and Culture*, ed. R. Olaniyan, Nigeria 1982, p. 2.

³ E. I. Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: the problem of interpretation*, Nigeria 1991, p. 120.

world, the material mirrors the sacred in different degrees. Though homocentric (man-centred) in practice, yet it finds its ultimate meaning in transcendence⁴.

Man tries to retain a relation both with his fellow human beings and other living beings on earth together with his Creator and other spiritual realities. In this dualistic world, God is seen as the originator of everything. Everything about them reflects the presence of God (*'Chukwu'*), including the names given to their children. The interpretation of events around their environments is also linked up to the image of this Supreme Being who exists but cannot be seen; close enough but cannot be touched (*ono nso eru aka*). But their worldview can best be comprehended when viewed from the same lens with their ontology.

III. African Ontology as a foundation for her religious experiences

Africans generally believe that the universe was created by God, but the details of this belief in a divine creation differed from one cultural area to another. This conception from the beginning laid a platform for Africans in their longing and search for the divine. It forms part of the aspect of the African identity. In other words, the idea of 'the divine' was never a foreign concept in the cultural lives of the Africans ever before the arrival of the missionaries. For the *Igbos*, the presence of God in their daily life or the existence of God is in the arena of the obvious. This can always be visibly appreciated in the conclusion of their morning prayers or any other form of prayer which can always be concluded with reference to God, the creator of the universe who dwells in high heavens (*Chukwu okike/ Obasi bi n'enu*). Also, greater percentage of the names given to their children end or begins with the idea of the immensity of Supreme Being. Examples abound: *Chukwuneke* (God creates); *Chukwudi* (God exists); *Chukwunenye* (God gives); *Chukwuebuka* (God is great), etc. Analytically, one sees the link between man as the physical being and the invisible Being which, as we already highlighted, the *Igbos* call "*Chukwu*" (the big Being, the big God). Olaniyan states that there existed two conceptions of the universe: the earthly one (man's home) and the heavenly (the home of the Creator), the visible and the invisible. There is, then, a fundamental trait that is common to the African cultures, and by extension, to most extra-continental black culture: that is, the duality in the African perception of the universe as between the visible and the invisible world, the natural and the divine, this world and the world of the gods and ancestors, man in his eco-system and God. It is this duality that defines the African's cultural manifestations⁵.

⁴ Cf. A. N. O. Ekwunife, *Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion*, Enugu 1990, p. 18.

⁵ Cf. R. Olaniyan, *African History and Culture*, p. 9.

The African Ontology is therefore, a worldview based on the totality of the life experiences of the people, dominated by the desire to know and understand more about where he is. African ontology of existence is also summed up in their efforts towards the interpretation of those visible eventful occurrences in their daily lives. Ontologically therefore, man is not just linked with every other man and with the universe around him, but most importantly to that Supreme Sustainer of the universe which man in many aspects controls. It is from this sense that one sees the idea that in all the traditions of Africa, a sense of the spiritual realities cannot be reasonably ignored. This is the foundation for their ontological search, nay, and the foundation of their sense of spiritual voyage.

Blessed Pope Paul VI alluded to this when he stated that a very important and common factor of this sense of spiritual realities is the notion of God as the first and ultimate cause of things. Such a notion is more experienced than described, more realized in life than apprehended by thought. It is expressed in many different ways according to the variety of cultural forms. In reality, a living sense of God as the supreme, personal and mystical being, pervades the whole of African culture⁶. And in his own view, Oborji asserted that the African's preoccupation with life and security provides the ingredients for our understanding of African ontology, 'the ultimate reality', including the existence of divine beings, in particular of God as the Supreme being who is the ultimate reality above all history and the root of the African religious formulation of the basis of life. In other words, the value that Africans attach to life, its prolongation and security, is the basis for our understanding of African ontology⁷.

In all these, man finds himself playing a central role in the linkage of these forces as well as benefitting from the forces. And for the Africans, man is a being unto others. It is from this understanding of his ontology that the African man forms his religious foundation, his cultural accentuation, and invariably, his collective identity. Cultural identity invariably involves the assertion of African identity and his religious tincture. Most importantly too, from the cosmological point of view, the understanding of an individual is in relation to the existing community but without losing his personal identity. One shares his own identity with others in a particular community. A further analysis will help in this regard.

IV. The Identity of the Human Person

The question of identity has never being obscured in the intellectual world. From the anthropological perspective, cultural, and sociological point of view,

⁶ Cf. Paul VI, *Africarum Terrarum: To the Hierarchy and the Peoples of Africa*, 1967, p. 149.

⁷ Cf. F. A. Oborji, *Concepts of Mission: the Evolution of Contemporary Missiology*, New York 2006, p. 195.

the concept remains very important in the search for a better understanding of man. From the theological background too, and especially with the greater attention given to the theology of inculturation in Africa, the concept of identity remains even more relevant today and at the core of the theology of inculturation. Reflecting on his theological developments, Bediako writes:

My own studies in formative stages of modern African theology brought me to the conclusion that the issue of identity lies at the heart of the process by which the Christian theological enterprise is actually carried forward. 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-definition⁸.

Indeed, human definition cannot be carried out in isolation of his identity, especially from the standpoint of cultural background which is instilled in him starting from his family. It is therefore naturally difficult for one to preach the Gospel of Christ or to receive the same Gospel without the colouring of the inherited cultural identity. His social, political, religious and cultural interaction with others in the society is purely based on his identity with that group. From the religious point of view, Africans are very much enshrined in religious activities so much so that one notices that one's identity in social life is *ipso facto* his own religious identity. Everything about Africans is linked up to religion. Their religion is their identity. This is inherited from the individual's family background. As one carries his family identity, so does he carry the religious identity.

Theologically speaking, this foundation, this attachment to the divine can be explored in such a way that it becomes something to be used for the African Christian identity. The available tool for this proper identification becomes the theology of inculturation, since man as a visible being, can always be better understood from his cultural perspective. Mbiti acknowledged the above stand of the Church in this way: "This idea of the unknown calls to mind the idea of religion. In Africa, it is very difficult to extricate religion from culture. For Africans, to be is to be religious in a religious universe"⁹. His life is religion and religion is his life. In his Post-Synodal Exhortation, "*Ecclesia in Africa*", Pope St. John Paul II reechoed this very fact when he noted that, "Africans

⁸ K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. Maryknoll, New York 1995, p. 256.

⁹ J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London 1970, p. 262.

have a profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, of the existence of God the Creator and of a spiritual world¹⁰.

In its process and actuation, cultural identity and dynamism of culture must be taken into account. Consequently, to evangelize human individuals and communities inevitably means the evangelization of culture, otherwise, evangelization becomes a purely superficial process, without personal identity. Moreover, God sent Jesus Christ into the world so that humanity may identify itself and its true self in him. God in his Christ becomes the ultimate ideal self and super ego in whom one could anchor one's self, group or community identity. And in the words of St Paul, we all shall bear the image of the new and heavenly man (1Cor. 15:49) and shall be changed into his likeness. Christianity, of its very nature is like water which while maintaining its identity appears in the colour of its container. Hence, catholic identity is a constantly emergent sense of new experience, and how that newness may be confronted¹¹. Consequently, African Christian theologians supported and sustained by their faith in the twofold theological principles of the Incarnation and the Restoration are searching for ways to do for the Church in Africa today what Augustine did for the Church of the Roman world, what Aquinas did for the Medieval Church, a cultural synthesis of such dimensions both effort and time¹².

Stressing on the importance of culture and its inseparability from humanity, and at the same time emphasizing its theological necessity, St. John Paul II observed that,

the Church truly respects the culture of each people. In offering the Gospel message, the Church does not intend to destroy or to abolish what is good and beautiful. In fact, she recognizes many cultural values and through the power of the Gospel purifies and takes into Christian worship certain elements of a people's customs. The Church comes to bring Christ; she does not come to bring the culture of another race. Evangelization aims at penetrating and elevating culture by the power of the Gospel¹³.

In other words, Christ is not a foreigner in any culture. He is part of every culture and identifies with any culture that meets Him. He can always meet an African within the ambience of that which makes him what he is, different from an Australian. As such, the transition from one's cultural identity as African

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 42.

¹¹ Cf. L. Mbefo, *Towards a Mature African Christianity*. Nigeria 1989, p. 47.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 63.

¹³ John Paul II, *Papal Message to Nigeria, a collection of speeches*, Published by the National Committee on Papal Visit, Nigeria 1982, p. 39. (Holy Father, Pope John Paul II on his first visit to Nigeria in 1982. On February 15th, 1982, the Holy Father met the Nigerian Bishops in the Apostolic Nunciature (then in Lagos, the former capital of Nigeria) and addressed them in a special way as his co-workers).

becomes smoother and more rewarding as he tries to identify with Christ in his Gospel message of hope and salvation. The best available tool for this proper identification becomes the theology of inculturation, especially today that many Africans are on the fringes of religious syncretism and neo-paganism.

V. Inculturation and its foundational analysis

A little clarification of some related concepts here will help us more to comprehend better the meaning of inculturation as it is used in this work. The word that is closely related to inculturation is “*enculturation*”. Some scholars especially from the cultural anthropology try to use these two words interchangeably. Granted that they are related, but there are some subtle differences. Generally, enculturation is a process through which a child who is born in a particular culture gradually learns the rudiments of his cultural environment which puts him in a better position to socialize with his people. The real foundation for this process is the family through the parents, older siblings, and elders in that particular community.

Through these people the child learns the established norms of the society including language, mode of dressing, eating habits and general life styles. However, some authors prefer to use the concept of “*acculturation*”. On the other hand, inculturation which is a more recent terminology (especially from the Catholic theology point of view) deals more with the marriage of two different cultures, an encounter between two cultures and more often used in theological circles. However, some theologians prefer to use such other concepts like “*adaptation*”, “*incarnation*” or even “*indigenization*” in place of inculturation. In this work, the concept of inculturation is used to explore the areas of interest between African cultural heritage and the Gospel of Christ as a theological issue. For such scholars like Schineller,

the exact origin of the word as it is used in the theological circle is not very clear. In any case, he tried to link it up with its usage by Cardinal Sin of Manilla at the Synod on Catechesis held in Rome in 1977 and its first insertion into Papal Documents by St. John Paul II in his apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis on October, 1979¹⁴.

In its initial stages, the focus in inculturation was on issues on Christian identity in non-Western cultures. These efforts coincided in many places with working to construct a postcolonial national identity apart from the history of European colonization. By the late 1980s, inculturation came to be seen as an important topic in other venues as well¹⁵.

¹⁴ P. Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, New York 1990, p. 98.

¹⁵ Cf. R. J. Schreiter, *Missiology's Future at the Intersection of the Intercultural and the Interreligious*, in: *Mission and Culture*, ed. Stephen B. Bevans, Maryknoll 2012, p. 278.

But whatever may be the case, the process of inculturation involves a mutual interaction between two cultures with perhaps distinct features and orientations, with different environmental developments. From the theological point of view therefore, Walligo asserted that,

inculturation means the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and his gospel of salvation ever more understood by peoples of every culture, locality and time. It is the reformulation of Christian life and doctrine into the very thought patterns of each people (...). It is the continuous endeavor to make Christianity truly feel at home in the cultures of each people¹⁶.

Vatican II Document defines inculturation as “the encounter of the Good News with cultures, an encounter which entails transformation of the authentic values of these cultures by their integration into Christianity”¹⁷.

In the theology of inculturation, we are dealing with the Gospel of Christ meeting the African with his traditional religious orientation and cultural inclinations. John Paul II emphasized that the power of the Gospel everywhere transforms and regenerates. When that power enters into a culture, it is no surprise that it rectifies many of its elements (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 53). Authentic inculturation indicates that there is an intimate transformation of cultural values by their integration into Christianity and also the implantation of Christianity into the different cultures. By inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community¹⁸.

Christ as ‘*the Word Made Flesh*’ took that Flesh from a particular culture and environment. The idea of the theology of inculturation is born out of the desire for the Gospel of Christ to be deeply rooted in human life with its cultural heritage. Africans will surely appreciate the message of the Gospel more when it wears the cultural garment of Africa. In this encounter, the faith becomes part and parcel of this new culture. It fuses with the new culture and simultaneously transforms it into a novel religious- cultural reality. In the process of inculturation,

the kingdom of God does not require replacing one set of cultural “cloths” with a new one. I would prefer to compare the kingdom of God, in the perspective of inculturation, with good soil which allows the seed or grains to grow up at once, provided that these are healthy. God’s field which contains only good soil, accepts all the positive elements of every culture and allows them to grow up and bear

¹⁶ J. Walligo, *Inculturation: Its meaning and Urgency*, Kenya 1996, p. 11.

¹⁷ A. Flannery, *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, Harrison 1984, p. 813.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, n. 52.

fruit. Thus it is always the same field, but with variety of plants which reflect the richness of the soil. Similarly, with the various cultures; in their inculturation of the revelation, they reflect the multiple riches of God in his inexhaustible mystery. This is yet another confirmation of the principle that guides African ecclesiology, viz; that the word – here, the revelation and the kingdom of God – is far too large and broad for any single mouth or any one culture¹⁹.

VI. Inculturation as a theological enterprise interpreted with African cultural background

In her wisdom, the Church articulated these words to the world:

While faithfully adhering to the Gospel and fulfilling her mission to the world, the Church, whose duty it is to foster and elevate, all that is found to be true, good and beautiful in the human community, strengthens peace among men for the glory of God²⁰.

With these words, the Church acknowledges the fact that no human community is perfect. However, such a community also contains certain things that are also good in themselves. Appreciation of this fact is important because, “Evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the interplay of the Gospel and of man’s concrete life, both personal and social. The “*instinctus divinus*” in man, or his fundamental “natural desire”, or in the words of St Augustine, the “groping of the restless heart” for God are apt tools for describing African religious experiences where one senses great awareness of the proximity of the spiritual and a deep sense of the numinous, to use Rudolf Otto’s formulation. God is genuinely present and active in the African religious experiences²¹.

However, Gospel and culture are the vital entities involving and influencing the human totality, which signifies that each of them plays a pivotal role in human life as a plausibility structure. In his famous statement, Karl Rahner put the challenge of inculturation and contextualization very succinctly:

The Church must be inculturated throughout the world if it is to be a World Church (...). This, then, is the issue: either the Church sees and recognizes these essential

¹⁹ B. Benezet, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the universal claims of Western morality*, Pauline Publications, Nairobi 2003, pp. 191-192.

²⁰ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 76.

²¹ Cf. A. U. Ekechukwu, *Theology of Religions and the theological problematic of inculturation*, in: *Religion and African Culture*, ed. E. E. Uzukwu, Nigeria, 1988, p. 141.

differences of other cultures for which she should become a world Church and with Pauline boldness draws the necessary consequences from this recognition, or she remains a Western Church and so, in the final analysis betrays the meaning of Vatican II²².

This challenge for the inculturation and internalization of the Gospel on African soil and African soul is a call for African Christian to deepen his Christian faith through the appreciation of the inherent values in his cultural and traditional givens.

The idea is to create a better and more appreciative playing ground on the part of the Mystical Body of Christ (the Church), so as to go on in the part of salvation with the cultures she encounters along the road. This is inculturation since human cultures also reflect divine truth and part of God's creative action. And most importantly, in this scenario, the Gospel speaks the language of the culture of a particular group and also dresses in that culture. In other words, the starting point of a more concrete and far-yielding evangelization in Africa is her cultural identity. According to M. P. Gallagher, "our receptivity for revelation is more shaped by culture than by philosophical clarities. We seldom live by ideas or ideologies but rather the images of life communicated by our surrounding worlds"²³. Man naturally is influenced by his cultural environment. His religious and political growth is always influenced by this environment. It is the core of his identity. As such, assimilation of other ideas in life, including new religious practices can always be measured from the background of this environmental cultural identity. This is what Blessed Pope Paul VI meant when he stated that:

The kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without subject to any one of them²⁴.

The Second Vatican Council was very positive when it stated that the Church "must implant itself in the same way that Christ by his incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances" (*AG 10*). In a more assertive way, the Council recommended that the local Churches are to "borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator" (*AG 22*). From the above stance of the Council, Schroeder came with

²² K. Rahner, *Towards a Fundamental Interpretation of Vatican II Council*, "Theological Studies", 40(1979), 4.

²³ M. P. Gallagher, S.J., *Clashing symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture*, London 1997, p. 4–5.

²⁴ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 20.

the idea that “the word *inculturation* was introduced to capture this dynamic interaction between the gospel and Church tradition, on the one hand, and the changing social and cultural context, on the other”²⁵.

From this perspective, African theologians remain emphatic that the advent of Christianity on African continent is, and will remain a welcomed development, both for Africans and the Church in general since it brings newness and freshness. However, more work is still needed for it to have a proper and truly contextual interpretation so as to yield more fruits. In other words, the Church must strive to make the Gospel more homely on African soil through better integration on African cultural identity. African cultural foundation if properly understood remains a veritable tool for the Message of the Gospel of Christ. St. John Paul II also expressed the importance of inculturation in the process of evangelization in these words:

Just as the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14), so too the Good News, the Word of Jesus Christ proclaimed to the nations, must take root in the life-situation of the hearers of the Word. Inculturation is precisely this insertion of the Gospel message into cultures. For the Incarnation of the Son of God, precisely because it was complete and concrete, was also an incarnation in a particular culture²⁶.

On another note, St. John Paul II remarked that “a faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out”²⁷. The Church in Africa must as a matter of fact have an African identity. This can only be possible through proper appreciation of those cultural and traditional institutions found in different parts of Africa. The relevance of the Gospel can be better seen from this cultural microscope. Shorter sees the encounter between the Gospel with what he calls ‘whole cultures’ from the perspective of liturgical actions. According to him, liturgical inculturation leans more toward an encounter between Gospel and culture than does mere textual creativity, and such an encounter is the essence and justification of inculturation²⁸.

It is in this cultural setting that an African can appreciate more this message. The message of the Gospel is to help him interpret and appreciate who he is in the light of Christ, who came, not to condemn but to renew that which is good in a given culture. This is what Azevedo captures as a practical theology when he stated that

²⁵ Roger P. Schroeder, *What is the Mission of the Church?* Maryknoll 2010, p. 122.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 60.

²⁷ John Paul II. *Address to the Italian National Congress of the Ecclesial Movement for Cultural Commitment*, January 16, 1982, *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed. June 28, 1982, 1–8.

²⁸ Cf. Aylward Shorter. *Inculturation in Africa – The way Forward*, in: *Mission and Culture*, ed. Stephen B. Bevans, Maryknoll 2012, p. 108.

Whatever the culture in which the Christian message has to be inculturated, reality must be the starting point of theological research and reflection. An interaction between professional theologians and people in their everyday life, as well as in their historical, social, cultural, political, and spiritual reality, could lead to a meaningful conceptualization of the Christian faith for today's world²⁹.

And in the words of A. Dulles, "culture is the materialization of the human spirit and at the same time a spiritualization of matter. It thus serves to render our world more human"³⁰.

VII. Summary and Conclusion

In his Apostolic Exhortation of 1975, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Blessed Paul VI remarked noted that

evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life³¹.

No doubt, there is the good news of the flowering of the Church in African continent today more than ever. The efforts of the missionaries have really yielded much fruits on African soil. However, evangelization is a continuous project for the Church and therefore a lot is still untouched especially in the area of cultural integration of the Gospel.

This is where the importance of the theology of inculturation cannot be overemphasized. It is a call for proper theological reappraisal of the missiological paradigm as it affects individual cultural identities not only in Africa, but globally. It is hoped that this will really solidify the faith of the Christians in many African countries. Theology of inculturation is a proper missiological vehicle for a deep-rooted faith in the Gospel of Christ. Hence, meaningful inculturated theology requires recognizable reference to the locally lived experience of people³². The concrete life of the people, especially in Africa has

²⁹ M. Azevedo. *Challenges to Inculturated Evangelization*, in: *Trends in Mission, towards the 3rd millennium*, eds. W. Jenkinson, H. O'Sullivan. New York 1991, p. 140.

³⁰ A. Dulles, *Church and Society: The Laurence J. McGinley Lectures 1988–2007*, New York 2008, 148.

³¹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 63.

³² Cf. Jose M. de Mesa, *Inculturation as Pilgrimage*, in: *Mission and Culture*, ed. S. B. Bevans, Maryknoll 2012, p. 10.

to be properly placed in a better perspective for the Gospel message to have a lasting effect on the African Christianity.

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