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INCULTURATION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS VALUES IN CHRISTIANITY – HOW FAR?

1. The Question

The title of this paper is expressed in the form of a question: "Inculturation of African Traditional Religious Values in Christianity - How Far?" Just over ten years ago I was asked to give a paper in Nairobi at the Goethe Institute and the title was "How African can African Christianity Be?" Its sub-title was: "What are the irreducible elements of Christianity, without which African Christianity cannot be Christian?" The danger with questions of this kind consists in seeing Christianity and African Culture as two competing quantities that flourish at each other's expense. More of one means less of the other. It is rather like two teams in a rugby match each making ground against the other. The reality is very different indeed. The result of inculturation should be a synthesis in which, as Pope John Paul II has written, "faith becomes culture". This is a demand of faith, as much as of culture. The goal of inculturation, therefore, is a single cultural entity that is at once a culture transformed by faith and a faith that is culturally re-expressed.

Inculturation is an inseparable aspect of evangelisation, which is the establishment of God's reign on earth, the realization of his project for humanity. Culture is an essential aspect of being human. It refers to the various patterns according to which human beings think, act and feel. Culture is the prism through which people view the whole of their experience. It is, as Geert Hofstede calls it, "the software of the mind", the shared mental package that helps to programme our perception and our behaviour. To evangelise human individuals and communities inevitably means the evangelisation of culture, as Pope Paul VI was the first to point out in 1975. Otherwise, evangelisation is a purely superficial process.

In a true inculturation, therefore, there are no winners or losers. Inculturation means the presentation and re-expression of the Gospel in forms and terms proper to a culture. This process results in the reinterpretation of both, without being unfaithful to either. Anything less, is not inculturation. In other words, it would be a syncretism and not a synthesis - the juxtaposition of non-communicating meanings.

To say that there should be no winners or losers in inculturation is not to say that the two terms of the process does not each have demands. What I want to do in this paper is to identify the demands of faith on the one hand and of (African) culture on the other, and to show how both are met in a genuine inculturation. The short answer to the question-title of this paper: "How far?" is

simply: "The sky is the limit, as long as the authentic demands of both faith and culture are respected".

2. Inculturation and the Tradition of Faith

A major consequence of inculturation is that a given culture is transformed by faith, and that the culture in question is introduced thereby into the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church. Inculturation is able to do this, because human cultures reflect divine truth. They are sanctioned by God as part of creation. The world-seeding Logos of God, the rational principle of creation "through whom all things were made" (John 1:3), has planted seeds of divine truth in every human culture. This is a normal consequence of humanity's creation in the image and likeness of God.
But human cultures are also a theatre of God's saving action, because they are flawed by ignorance, error and sin. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit is active in human cultures, even before they are explicitly evangelised, and that the Spirit is responsible for Christ's saving presence in them. It is the duty of inculturation (evangelisation) to reveal this presence and this activity, to discover and affirm the seeds of truth and to challenge everything in the culture, which impedes the full manifestation of God's truth and love.

Theologians have different ways of explaining this transformation of culture by faith. One way is to situate the process in what is called the *missio Dei*, "God's mission", his loving and saving dialogue with his creation. God loves his creatures in their "otherness", in their cultural particularity. The missio *Dei* reaches its climax in the great commandment of universal love and its practical implementation in the life and sacrifice of Jesus. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn.3: 16).
Another approach taken by theologians is to see inculturation as a consequence of the Incarnation. By becoming human, God has identified himself with human culture. Culture was part of the human nature adopted by God the Son. This identification was completed in the paschal mystery. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus transcended the limitations of an earthly life and identified with each and every human culture that has existed, or will ever exist. This process of identification involves the death and resurrection of each and every culture. Christians believe, therefore, that their faith is the perfection of every culture.

We have been examining up to now the encounter between faith and culture. It is time now to explore what we mean by "faith". In writing about "faith", we are writing about a tradition concerning Jesus, a tradition concerning the Gospel or "Good News" of the Reign of God inaugurated by Jesus. In the New Testament, this Gospel is sometimes called the "Word of God" or "the Way". These names have important implications. In the first place, Jesus is both the "Word" and the "Way". So, we are really saying that Jesus himself enters into cultures. This personalized understanding of inculturation is frequently alluded to by Pope John Paul II on his pastoral journeys, when he tells his audiences: "In you, Christ has become African"; "In you, Christ has become Indian", and so forth.

In the second place, these names imply that the Gospel is a pattern of life. It is a Word that is shared, a Way of life that is lived. In other words, the Gospel is applicable to culture and operates within cultures. When we speak of faith encountering culture, we are always referring to faith in

one or another cultural form encountering another culture. Evangelisation is fundamentally an intercultural process.

We are speaking about a tradition concerning Jesus. Our Christian religion is a historical religion and Jesus is first and foremost a historical person, who lived in first century Palestine, at that time in a situation of considerable cultural complexity. Jesus lived and responded to the cultures of the New Testament. Everything that he said and did was expressed in the culture of the time. The New Testament, which is the heir to the Jewish Bible, is our evidence for the tradition concerning Jesus. If we want to understand Jesus and his message, we must read the New Testament culturally; and, in reading and translating Scripture, we have to be utterly faithful to its language, both semantic and cultural. In fact, the only culture that is privileged and indispensable in the Church, the only culture with which the Church can identify, is the culture of Jesus. For example, if we come from Papua New Guinea, where pigs are the most highly prized of animals, we have to get used to a biblical culture in which pigs are despised as unclean. If we come from a forest village in Congo Kinshasa where lambs are unknown, we have to try to understand a culture in which the epithet "Lamb of God" is applied to Jesus.

The tradition concerning Jesus has been called "a trajectory of meaning" that stretches from his lifetime up to the present day. It is coherent and continuous, but, as Vatican II taught, "it makes progress in the Church". It goes from culture to culture and from history to history. In every age and place the tradition arouses new questions and responses, entering into dialogue with the genius of successive cultures. The tradition does not change, but it acquires surplus meaning, as new implications are identified and new insights are disclosed. The Church's teaching authority, or *magisterium* is frequently obliged to make official faith-statements or definitions. These are couched in the semantic and cultural language of the time, and they need to be reformulated again and again in order to preserve their meaning. However, that meaning cannot be contradicted or rejected.
The trajectory of meaning, which is the Christian tradition of faith, also includes the Church's own self-understanding, as a visible and hierarchically structured communion. It includes certain unchanging concepts concerning ministry and Church order, although their secondary forms and functions may vary.

A good example of inculturation is provided by the successive images of Jesus through the centuries, as the tradition of faith passed from Judaism into the Greco-Roman culture of the Mediterranean, thence into the Christian Roman Empire, Byzantium, the Middle Ages of western Europe, the Renaissance, Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment, the Romantic movement, the non-western experience of decolonisation and liberation and so on. Jesus was depicted successively as Lord of History, Light of the Gentiles, King of Kings, True Icon of God, the Crucified God, the Bridegroom of the Soul, the Universal Man, the Mirror of Truth, the Prince of Peace, the Poet of the Soul, the Liberator, the Ancestor, Master of Initiation, Healer and many more. All of these images correspond to particular cultures, places and epochs, but all are in the authentic tradition concerning Jesus. All these images can be indexed back to the outlooks, and sometimes even to the very words, of the New Testament itself. They are an extraordinary example of the "marriage of meanings" that is the essence of inculturation.

As Pope John Paul II pointed out in *Ecclesia in Africa*, inculturation applies to every aspect of the Christian's existence and every aspect of the Church's, teaching, life and practice. Inculturation is

very far from being the specialized work of theologians, liturgists and canonists. It takes place wherever faith encounters life. Culture itself is a shared phenomenon, and inculturation, whatever the contribution of creative individuals, is also basically the work of a community.

3. The Church's Cultural Patrimony

Christianity is a historical religion and inculturation is part of the Church's history. A by-product of this historical process is a certain accumulation of cultural elements, beginning with the cultures of the Bible and going through the long list of successive inculturations. I call this accumulation the Church's "Cultural Patrimony". The word "culture" is widely abused nowadays, but the pre-Vatican opinion that the Church's cultural patrimony constitutes a culture in the normal sense of the word is - by and large - no longer held. According to anthropological definition, this patrimony lacks the coherence, the completeness and the simultaneity of a culture, which is a whole way of life.

However, because of the unique history and character of Christianity, elements from the Church's cultural patrimony are always included in the synthesis brought about by inculturation. This is because there is nothing in the evangelised culture that corresponds to such elements, which are considered necessary or useful. We have already mentioned the cultures of the Bible. These are strictly necessary for the understanding of Scripture, which, in the Christian tradition, cannot be replaced by any other historical or mythological literature. The Church "identifies" with biblical culture, but this is not our own living culture of today. The cultures of the first century AD are, in fact, dead cultures. The reason for emphasis on biblical culture is because it belongs to the humanity and historicity of Jesus himself, who is the subject of evangelization/inculturation. Because of this, African Christians should not be afraid of absorbing some foreign cultural elements. People of every culture have to do this and it is part of the reality of inculturation itself, especially where these elements are essential to Christian identity.

Then there is the use of words, gestures and rites - particularly those that belong to the liturgy of the sacraments - in which the Church claims to be acting as Jesus himself did or has commanded us to do: Baptism by water or the consecration of the Eucharistic bread and wine, which Jesus substituted for the blessings of the Jewish Passover Meal. The Church is not conscious of being able to change these things, without being unfaithful to the historical Jesus.

The Church's cultural patrimony also includes a great many non-essential elements, most them being relics of previous inculturations. Some are imposed as part of the current discipline of the Church, others are optional and more or less useful, as the case may be. These non-essential elements include doctrinal formulations, devotions, styles of ecclesiastical architecture and dress. The study of past inculturations, especially the history of doctrinal formulations is necessary for the student of theology, if essential meaning is to be detached from transient cultural forms. It is to be hoped that African Christianity will seek and enjoy much greater freedom in these non-essential areas.

4. Inculturation: the Demands of Culture

"Our first task in approaching another people, another culture...is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy." So wrote Max Warren, Secretary of the Church Missionary

Society from 1942-1963. As we have seen, human cultures are vehicles of divine truth and theatres of God's salvific action. Like Moses before the burning bush, we must take off our shoes. Cultures must be respected. Disrespect for culture is an abuse of a human right and not even evangelization can ignore this obligation. The transformation of culture that is worked by evangelisation should lead to its enhancement, not its diminishment.

A common form of disrespect for culture is to refuse to take it seriously as a coherent and whole system of images and values. Instead, an eclectic, "pick and mix" approach is adopted, whereby cultural elements are lifted from the culture and inserted incongruously into otherwise culturally foreign contexts. This happens, for example, when African cultural elements are incorporated in a liturgical celebration that is otherwise entirely western in character. This is acculturation, or the borrowing of disparate elements, but it is not inculturation.

Inculturation, as we have seen, is the transformation of a culture by faith and the cultural re-expression of faith by culture. An inculturated Eucharist (or other liturgical rite), therefore, should be a genuine instance of a wider process involving the transformation of the whole culture. It remains recognizably the Christian Eucharist, with its necessary components and structure, but the style, the context, the spirit, is culturally new. The Ndzon Melen Eucharistic Rite, devised by Fr. P.-C. Ngumu and Fr. P. Abega, in Cameroon, in 1969, for example, was based on the cultural model of a reconciliation assembly among the Beti people. The whole celebration was African in flavour and inspiration. It was very far from being a western celebration of the Roman rite, with a few African elements inserted. This was ensured, among other things, by continuous dance and African instrumental and vocal music. Many Feast Day, if not Sunday, celebrations in Africa now achieve this, as does the celebration of the Zaïre Mass, and they provide strong grounds, in my opinion, for implementing the suggestion of Fr. Eugene Uzukwu CSSp., the Nigerian liturgist, concerning a Special African Liturgical Region of the Roman Rite. When considering liturgical inculturation in Africa, we usually think of Africanising a western sacramental rite, but there are also cases in which an African rite has to be Christianised. Numerous have been the attempts over the years to Christianise African initiation rituals. Another celebrated case of inculturation is the Liturgy for Second Burial in Zimbabwe. This is a Christian version of the *Kurova Guva* ("Smearing the Grave") ritual of the Shona people, which takes place a year or so after the original burial of the deceased. This rite was approved by the Catholic Bishops of Zimbabwe in 1982. The Christianising of African traditional rites, perhaps even more than the inculturation of Christian sacraments, demands the Christian transformation of the whole background culture, and this is a question of theological inculturation.

5. The Christian Transformation of African Culture

The Christian transformation of culture is a way of taking that culture seriously. It is not a take-over bid, a form of cultural imperialism. Rather, it is a reinterpretation of that culture, which results in the enhancement of its authentic meaning. I will now give examples of this, both general and particular.

African ethnic religions are typically "religions of nature". That does not mean that they are "nature religions", in which natural phenomena are objects of worship. It means that created nature offers both an explanation of the divine and at the same time the means of contact with divine reality. In African religion, the physical environment is not only sacred, but it is also an

organic universe. In other words, nature is biologically continuous with humanity, and it connects human beings with the world of spirit.

Such a conceptual scheme can be Christianised, with reference to an ascending Christology. Christ has ascended through all the cosmic spheres and "has placed all things under his feet" (Ephesians 1:22). In other words, by becoming human and through the mystery of his death and resurrection, Christ has brought about a cosmic rebirth. In this new world order, humanity and created nature - which is the setting of human life - have been reattached to God. The physical environment can therefore speak to us, not only about God the Creator, but also about the redemption wrought for us by Christ. The cosmic Christ can be discerned both in the human community and in the natural environment.

Another example of an ascending Christology is provided by the experience of base communities in urban Africa. From their reading of the Bible, members of these communities understand the humanity of Jesus from their own experience of being human. In their concern for social justice and in their compassion for the poor and the sick, they celebrate the compassion and the healing activity of Jesus. From this experience of realities in the town, in other words, the consideration of what it means to be human in conditions that are inhuman, they rise to an intuition of the divinity of Jesus. Christology, therefore, illuminates and reinterprets this experience of urban culture.

A particular example of the Christian transformation of an African organic universe is provided by Thomas Christensen's theology and catechesis of the African Tree of Life. Christensen is an American Lutheran missionary, who has worked for a number of years in Cameroon among the Gbaya people, who are also found across the border in the Central African Republic. A semiotic analysis of the structure of Gbaya signs revealed that the root-symbol of the Gbaya is the Soré tree. The whole web of meaning that underlies Gbaya culture is centred on this ordinary little tree (*anona senegalensis*), which is called by them "the cool thing". A branch from the Soré tree is used ritually to help Gbaya overcome the threat of death in cases of blood feud or the breaking of taboos that entail the sanction of death. It helps them cope with their consciousness of sin and takes them through the threat of death into a new life. It is therefore very much a "tree of life". Both Christensen and the Gbaya saw in the Soré an analogy with the cross of Christ as the means of salvation in Christianity. They therefore reinterpreted the whole Soré symbolic complex in the light of a Christian theology of the Cross.

The association of Soré with the crucified Jesus was first made by Gbaya Christian preachers themselves. It was a search for theological meaning evoked by evangelization. This led to the reflection: "What does Jesus have to do with Soré?" The answer is that the cross-links Jesus with Soré. It is the symbol of all that God has done for us in and through Jesus. The cross is the fulfilment of Soré, transforming it and enhancing its meaning.

Christensen examined all the Gbaya life contexts in which Soré played a role. These included ritual meals and sacrifices, purification in life-crisis rituals, blood-pacts, marriage, dancing, hunting, conflict resolution and reconciliation, justice and peace, vows and promises, exorcisms, funerals, prophecy and moving house. He then examined biblical and patristic tree symbolism, and particularly the tree of life image as applied to the cross. This reaches a climax in the thirteenth century writings of St. Bonaventure.

When the Gbaya Soré meanings are applied to the cross of Jesus, they bring a metaphorical newness to Christian teaching, but they are themselves transcended by the reality of salvation wrought by Christ. The Gbaya believe that God is at work in Soré. The application, therefore, of this symbol to Jesus draws attention to his divinity. Soré is the symbol of life and the transmission of life through the covenant of love, which is marriage. It is therefore an apt symbol of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, the Word of Life. The use of Soré in the washing rituals at Gbaya funerals are the means by which the bereaved return to normal life, Christensen shows their relevance to the "water of life" in Christian Baptism, through which a person dies and rises to eternal life. The prominence of Soré in meals of reconciliation, lends itself to a Eucharistic application with the "Bread of Life".

Many parallels can therefore be found between Gbaya culture and Christian salvation theology. Moreover, this transformation of Gbaya culture by Christian faith sets the scene for particular Gbaya inculturations of the image of Jesus himself and of the Christian sacraments. We can appreciate, therefore, that inculturation is not a set of unrelated, piecemeal adaptations. Rather, particular instances of inculturation must reflect a Christian approach to a whole culture.

6. Examples of Catechetical and Homiletic Inculturation

Catechetical and homiletic inculturation may not take place on the same scale as the Gbaya project, nor with the same degree of comprehensiveness, however, like the Gbaya example, they usually reflect the wider background process of inculturation of which we are speaking. One of the most successful religious education programmes in Africa has been the so-called Gaba Syllabus for Secondary Schools. In fact, the syllabus for the final two years of the course was drawn up at a series of international and ecumenical workshops. The result was a thematic treatment of Christianity, beginning with an analysis of the present situation, going on to the values of African tradition and the experience of the Churches, and finally deepening the findings in the light of Biblical revelation. This process was designed to help the student make a synthesis for his or her own life. A conscious purpose of the syllabus was to explore the cultural heritage of Africa in order to see how it could contribute to a Christian understanding of each theme and to a sense of continuity and identity for the African Christian. From the point of view of content, such an aim was wholly within the purview of inculturation, although the term was not yet current when the syllabus was published. However, the materials themselves were devised for the classroom and were addressed to the young educated elite in the African secondary school. Methodologically, they were comparable to other published examples of experiential catechesis.

Ten years earlier, a missionary in Nigeria had made a plea to take catechetics out of the classroom, to jettison blackboard and chalk, and to abandon the traditional, printed catechism or religion syllabus. Instead, Bernard Mangematin, an acknowledged expert in the language and culture of the Yoruba, preferred to use a form of traditional praise prayer known as *oriki*. He argued that catechesis through prayer would give the student a true religious sense and a real conviction that was impossible to achieve through explanatory and discursive lessons. "My Father’s House is a House of Prayer. Do not change it into a classroom."

The Oriki has been called "a form of prayer by which the Yoruba praise their gods in a manner that is in complete conformity with their culture". It is a poetic hymn, chanted in honour of an

Orisa, or divinity, or of an important person. It can be addressed to a divinity either in the privacy of an early morning offering or in regular cult meetings and festivals. It is a series of epithets or appellations addressed to the subject by the devotee, which is both expressive and efficacious. Not only does it encapsulate the essence of the subject, but also it enhances its presence. It empowers, it propitiates, and it augments the reputation of the subject. It strengthens the bond between praise-singer and subject and it spreads healing and harmony in the community. *Oriki* praise poetry constitutes a shared, protean repertoire, with an infinity of manifestations.

The *Oriki* is essentially oral, spontaneous and imaginative. It recruits ideas and images from a wide spectrum of sources, and appeals as much to the emotions as to the intellect. In this way it mirrors the world, natural, human and divine. Like the Yoruba divinities themselves, the poems, which praise them, are inconsistent, fragmented and merging. This is not an accidental or deplorable untidiness, but is, as Karin Barber shows, a faithful reflection of the fluidity and dynamism in relationships, both human and divine. Although Yoruba traditional religion has declined, the *Oriki* still flourish vigorously, especially among women. In fact, the principal praise-singers and carriers of *Oriki* are women, because through marriage they are also the primary sources of social differentiation and social linking.

It is obvious that considerable skill and inventiveness is needed for a religion teacher to master this oral, literary form, and to adapt it to the requirements of Christian catechesis. This, no doubt, is why catechists and pastors have been slow to take up Bernard Mangematin's challenge. The very fluidity and fragmentary nature of the *genre* may also make it appear unsuitable as a replacement for a catechism text or R.E. syllabus. However, the missionary's appraisal of the Oriki's cultural importance is corroborated by the judgement of the anthropologist and scholar of religion.

No doubt, the published translations of *Oriki* poems do scant justice to the elusive and subtle character of the originals, and this is equally true of Mangematin's inculturated Oriki. This incorporates quotations from traditional examples, published and unpublished, but basically it is a mosaic of excerpts from the books of the Old and New Testaments. These include, Genesis, Job, Isaiah and Psalms, as well as the Four Gospels, Hebrews, 1 Timothy and the Apocalypse. There is also a reference to the liturgy of Ash Wednesday, the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary. Mangematin insists on the use of proverbs, aphorisms and images derived from the Bible and the Liturgy, even if they are not fully understood at first. The *Oriki*'s power to generate conviction rests on the ability of symbols to question or disturb the hearer.

Mangematin's sample *Oriki* is a catechesis on the mystery of God's holiness. It begins as a praise greeting of God, and then develops images of light, fire, lightning, swiftness and sharpness. After this, the poem uses symbols of purity, lucidity and innocence. These qualities are contrasted with the sinfulness and weakness of humanity, and the poem ends with a prayer for salvation. The reciprocity of God and humanity emerges in every stanza and the hearer is progressively involved, as the poem develops: "Take the shoes from thy feet"; "Rise from the dead and Christ will enlighten thee"; "And we are but dust and ashes"; "Pray for us sinners, now and at the last hour"; "Alas, I must keep silent", and so on. It is in this reciprocity that the poem's efficaciousness consists. It is clear that to pursue this experiment a type of catechist or religion teacher would have to be formed, who is not only steeped in Yoruba culture and oral literature, but in the Bible and liturgy as well. This is necessary if the inculturated prayer poem is to draw

upon all the resources of Yoruba culture and Catholic Christianity. At present no such creative people have been encouraged to come forward, and the official Church practises a somewhat negative tolerance towards the chanting of Oriki. This is permitted, for example, at Catholic funerals after the departure of the priest. The *Oriki* tradition is an aspect of the Yoruba cultural heritage, which unites Christians of every denomination, and it is clear that it has considerable catechetical and liturgical potential, as Mangematin suggests.

The Kimbu people inhabit about eighty village clearings in the woodland wilderness of west-central Tanzania. They are shifting maize cultivators with a hunting-gathering specialization. An important genre in their oral literary tradition is the *chante-fable* or choric story, in which speech and song are alternated. Story telling is a popular pastime in the Kimbu village, and it is characterized by much spontaneous dialogue between the storyteller and his or her audience. The latter is not afraid to interrupt the performance with questions, comments and reiterations, the better to savour the story. The chante-*fable* formalizes this tendency, by introducing a sung response or refrain at set moments in the story. Although the story itself is basically a free narrative, the refrain imparts an air of formality and turns the telling of the story into a celebration. The refrains fulfil various functions in the story. They indicate its structure and mark successive, parallel episodes or developments. Even more importantly, they encapsulate the story's deeper meaning. The refrain is a key to its final *denouement*. For this reason, the choric story form is used mainly for aetiologies and myths, which convey a social moral or community value. Among the Kimbu these include the stories of "Miyunga and the Birds"; "Nyumaa, the Buffalo Hunter"; "The Girl and the Forest Monster"; and "Chief Ipupi, Terror of Those Who Wake Him".

The first two stories deal with hunters whose prowess in the forest was an affront to nature, and who were destroyed by the creatures they hunted - in the case of Miyunga, birds; and of Nyumaa, buffaloes. The story of "The Girl and the Forest Monster" is told in many versions. It is a salvation myth about a little girl called Uchali who was seized in the forest by Idimungala, the giant master of the animals. In some accounts she was rescued by her fellow children; in others, through her own daring. It is a celebration of the victory of innocence over the power of evil. The myth of "Chief Ipupi, Terror of Those Who Wake Him" is a politico-cosmological charter for the seniority of the Kimbu founder chiefdom and for the chief's role as surrogate of God. It is full of solar and earth symbolism, but the story is centred on the magical gourd-bow, the musical instrument by means of which Ipupi communicated with his subordinates. This instrument is known to the Kimbu as Isimeli. The refrain expresses the popular fascination and wonderment regarding Ipupi's magical device: "Isimeli, you are sweet and fair!"

At the end of 1968, I launched a homiletic experiment in which the Sunday homily took the form of a Kimbu choric story, with a refrain to be sung at different points by the congregation. A serious attempt was made to use Kimbu stories in these homilies, and while their original meaning was respected, it was amplified in the light of Biblical teaching and Christian doctrine. An African, traditional theme was thus developed into a Christian theme. Although the homilies were given in the Swahili language, they contained copious references to Kimbu language and literature. In an Advent homily, the stories of Miyunga and Nyumaa were used to show that we have to render account to God for our use of creation. This was put in the context of the Advent readings about being faithful and watchful stewards. The tune of the refrain was based on that of a Swahili hymn, and the words were: "You are close, O Lord!" A Christmas

homily used the salvation myth of Uchali as a lead into the story of Christ's birth, and a lesson on spiritual childhood. Again, the chorus: "The child Jesus has saved us!", borrowed the tune of a Swahili hymn refrain.

The most ambitious of these homilies used the solar symbolism, which Kimbu apply to God, and developed it with reference to Biblical solar symbolism and New Testament salvation themes of light and darkness. The refrain was: "Sun of Justice, shine on us, shine on us!", and this was set to the tune of the Kimbu Isimeli refrain. The extraordinary enthusiasm, which greeted this experiment, exceeded all expectations, and news of the Kimbu homilies spread far beyond the villages in which they were preached. Some people appreciated the sung refrain and said that they found it difficult to listen to a monologue. Others liked the references to the Kimbu stories and customs, which made the message of the homily more real for them.
Since conducting this homiletic experiment in Ukimbu in 1968, I have continued to use the choric story format on many occasions when preaching in East Africa. Although this was a genuine case of independent invention, many African preachers naturally use the method. The late Cardinal Emmanuel Nsubuga, for example, Archbishop of Kampala, Uganda, was an accomplished exponent.

With regard to the cultural content of the homily, there have been several other initiatives involving the use of African oral literature. Declan Brosnan and Jon Kirby edited a collection of African parables, which follow the cycles of the Lectionary and provide thoughts for expounding the Sunday readings in the homily. For some years, Donald Sybertz and Joseph Healey have been collecting Tanzanian proverbs, analysing and presenting them for homiletic and catechetical use. The inculturation of the ministry of the Word is, beyond doubt, a developing reality in Africa.

7. Conclusion

In attempting to answer the question: "Inculturation of African Religious Values - How Far?", I hope I have shown how difficult it is to set any limits to inculturation. If the Christian transformation of culture is undertaken in earnest, then the possibilities are virtually endless. What matters is to remain faithful to the tradition concerning Jesus and to the authentic values of African religion and culture. That fidelity can only be ensured by a profound acquaintance with both the Christian tradition of faith and with African cultures. To this - it goes without saying - must be added a genuine faith in the process of inculturation itself!

Source : http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/shorter.htm