

Naming Ceremony in African Independent Churches— A Cultural Revolution

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Naming ceremony has been divinely instituted by God within the Old Testament account. The act of giving names has highly cherished both within the Old Testament and the New Testament respectively. In the Old Testament account, there was no indication of a given time when Adam was given his own name, all that we have was that Adam was addressed as Adam; prior to this identification, he had been referred to as the man.

It became imperative that the symbol of identification was needful, hence, the term man was dropped and a name was then given to the new creature. In Genesis account, as contained in 2: 19-20, it was reported that out of the ground, the Lord formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

At this juncture, we need to reiterate the point clearly that, the act of having to bring those animals to man was not that God was indeed short of ideas or names with which He could address those animals; rather we should view things in the perspective of man having to live and deal with those animals, such given identity by man automatically became operational and relative for later use in man's life. If at all there was anything named by God, it was Adam and all other creatures were given their respective names by Adam. Although there were instances when names were given through angels, that will rule out the possibility of Adam having to name even personalities like John and Jesus. Also men have taken over such act presently.

We can in view of the divine power that God gave Adam conjecture that power had absolutely been passed unto him and through him, others have come to live by and with their given names. This will tend to explain how and why names have been said to carry a lot of meaning from ages past.

God indeed recognised the need to give names, and in so doing, He/She delegated the power to humans and whatever names that

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was administered has since remained the names given. Adam having named the animals, the next thing was the giving of a name to the newly created helper, and that was woman (Eve). The administration of names at first did not go with any ritual because of the inherent force that has to go with the names given, power then was absolute because of the delegated nature of authority right from God's throne. In naming of the created things, humans principally had the privilege of exercising absolute power.

Within the New Testament era, names were given as at when due and this was in consonance with the set example in the Old Testament. Naming ceremony often is done in conjunction with circumcision as witnessed in the life of John among others in the New Testament. Within most traditions, the act of giving names is the exclusive responsibility of the father, and this has since continued in most part of the world. The mothers usually give their baby a name as they wish, but in most cases, children are noted to bear the names that their father must have given them. Within African culture and precisely the Yoruba tradition, names given by mothers are played down considerably.

Before the inception of Christianity in Africa, names had always been given, and such names are descriptive of our cultural values. It is also good to add that the names are self encoding and decoding; the mastery of the cultural language will afford an enquiring mind the power to understand the associated meaning of those names. It is also good we stress that various clan or ward do have their distinctive names, and that can be used as a point of identification for them. Yoruba world was noted for inter-tribal warfare which often produce slavery. Apart from names that were associated with clan setting, tribal marks often goes along with the giving of names.

Names are not given for giving sake rather, the act goes along with the use of some traditional objects. To an African person, naming ceremony is an initiation rite which serves as a welcoming party for the new baby into a new environment. Prior to the time of naming, the new child is often referred to as a stranger who has just come. Such a guest may choose to stay or go back depending on the nature of treatment he is given. The time of naming varies in most societies, but the general practice is that boys are named on the ninth day of his birth while a girl is named on the seventh day. The often given reason for this variation defers. In most society, but the mostly and widely expressed view was because man were said in the Yoruba mythology to have nine bones in their rib cage while a woman has seven. Scientifically, this claim can be contested, but as it is, it is relative to the Yoruba

culture alone. With due innovations, things have since changed considerably with timing in naming ceremony.

In situations where the born babies are twins and of opposite sex, their naming will always be on the eighth day so as not to make any of the coming ancestors feel cheated. Naming goes along with various objects as the culture may dictate. Within the Yoruba culture, naming is often done very early in the morning, prior to this time, nothing that the baby had used will be exposed not until the fortieth day.

1. The Missionary Understanding of Africa :

The attempt of the early missionaries should be commended for they were motivated by sincere love with a view of assisting the people within African region. Their exploit was remarkable except for some shortcomings. In spite of this, some of the missionaries were extremely ignorant of the society they had come to evangelise, with an ignorance partly blame worthy ; moreover, they came with an almost impregnable confidence in the overwhelming superiority of the European West and in all ways of society and culture which they had taken for granted in their own homes, whether evangelical or Catholic. Much of the missionary endeavour was based on the presupposition that African ways were necessarily pagan and had to be done away with.¹

The expressed opinion of the early missionaries with regards to the African ways of life have been a point of attraction to some scholars. Dietrich Westerman amply underscores the missionaries' position of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as follows :-

However anxious a missionary may be to appreciate and to retain indigenous social and moral values in the case of religion, he has to be withless... he has to admit and even emphasize that the religion he teaches is opposed to the existing one and has to cede to the other.²

The quest to retain some of the indigenous tradition was uppermost, but in the areas of religion, caution has to be exercised. This was their opinion about the indigenous religion. The point as raised above is that of a scholar who has no African trait in him, he was out to express in an objective manner what he felt the reaction of the missionaries was. Africans were not left out in their attack on the missionary evaluation of African cultural values. In his own opinion, Desmond Tutu said :

To most of the missionaries, those whom they were to convert

were indeed benighted pagans whose way of life was thoroughly uncivilised and therefore irredeemably heathen.³

Desmond Tutu was apt in bringing to light what the expressed concern of the missionaries was. They had no respect for the indigenous culture, in view of this fact, they were out at all cost to undermine whatever the Africans may uphold.

In the light of the above claim, most of the missionaries would set themselves the task of demolishing everything, so far as they were able. It was this missionary attitude and method of working that Parrinder has to content against. He said :-

The old attitude of missionaries was usually destructive, the indigenous religion was not studied ; it was not thought to have any divine revelation or inspiration, and little effort was made to use any part of it as a basis for further teaching. But it is not necessary to deny that the old religion both taught some truth and produced some spiritual values and loving.⁴

In the true sense of the matter, African cultural ideas should be given some consideration within the church set-up. If the church will be successful in Africa, the missionaries ought to realise that they are out for a profitable venture outside their own geographical location, and to be successful, they ought to seize every available opportunity opened to them thus entrenching Christianity within the region. The only alternative is to incorporate African norms into Christianity. It may be right that some of those things that they practice, within African culture may not conform with the law of science, but that does not imply that they are not practicable. We should not be too rigid in our evaluation of what others uphold in religious matters. It is also good to stress that scholars should not hold a subjective idea based on some preconceived notions. After all we have come to discover that something good still inhere within African culture.

In spite of the co-ordinated attack against African ways of life, Africans are out to reclaim their past, and they will do anything at its best to put their cultural thought form in the forefront. In that group of scholars is Stephen N. Ezeanya, an Igbo Catholic scholar. He was unhampered by pope Pius XII's unfortunate use of the word "wild" as depicting African culture, in return he quotes his strong statement of 1951 on traditional religion as cultural and religious base for Christianity :-

Let not the gospel on being introduced into any New Land destroy or extinguish whatever it's people possess that is naturally good, just or beautiful for the church... does not act like one who recklessly cuts down and uproots a thriving forest. No, she grafts a good scion upon the wild stock that

it may bear a crop of more delicious fruits.⁵

Ezeanya and those who are of the same conviction with him will rather advocate for toleration of African cultural values. It has continued to be the ways of life of the people. To attempt uprooting at this stage may not be in the interest of the Africans. Rather than uprooting, the missionaries should attempt to unite the two cultural norms. As it was obvious, the African cultural norms were not seriously considered. This as a result, created the need to ask for recognition by the African within the church set-up. This bold request actually created the room for the cultural revolution that we shall be discussing in due course.

2. African Agitation for a Change :

The Africans were resolute in the attempt to establish their culture within the main stay of Christianity. In their bid not to accept the state into which everything about their religion and culture have been drawn, Africans in their number stood to the task to challenge and as well ask for the incorporation of their religious and moral thought form unto the main stay of Christianity as practised by the white missionaries. This urge actually set into motion the need for cultural revolution.

In the words of Hasting, cultural revolution is said to have the following implications :-

In Chinese term, "cultural revolution have meant the sweeping away of the tradition of conscious, of the whole weight of the historic past"; in African terms, cultural revolution may mean today just the opposite. It means rediscovering the wisdom of the ancestors, revaluing their ceremonies, reawakening their names, renewing their language, of course a purely reactionary cultural revolution would be a flight from reality in the present day Africa.⁶

The reality of what the African cultural values represent has been the moving force that is encouraging the demand for the integration of those practices into Christianity. To an African person, Christianity is too abstract that he/she can hardly believe the very existence of what those missionaries claimed. The African person has been orientated to think not in an abstract term but in concrete terms. It will therefore not surprise us why the Africans are asking for the integration of their culture into Christianity. The clamour for cultural revolution has not only been taken seriously in other aspect of human development but also on the church as well as in the social structure of the community.

There have been that serious agitations, asking for a complete

break with the past, thus instituting African Christianity which will be indigenous and that which will favour African cultural values. What the missionaries' cultural value upholds is in contrast to ours, though we cannot undermine the significant contributions they have rendered to us in this part of the world. Such contributions are relative, we need not to be over dependent on foreign values, Africans should strive to develop their culture to an enviable standard within and outside their region, otherwise, who will help them to elevate their culture ?

The fact has to be stressed that there is need to reawake those traditional norms of the past society which are fast fading out. Its entrenched sanity stands against evils, and it's cautionary ability will in no way bring sanity to the decadent society of our days. The church in every sense of it ought to be a disseminate point of God's love, but in the evaluation of the Africans, the church to them is a cultural alienating element because of her stand against African values.

In the perception of Kofi, the African individual really do not see the direct relevance of Christianity to his/her life. To him/her then, the Christian church was overtly an arm of the colonial government. The colonial government at it's inception was aggressive and unco-operative with the yearnings of the Africans, more importantly, the government came into being through the efforts of the missionaries all in the name of extending the Gospel. In due course, a governmental machinery was set into motion to give adequate cover for missionaries within the region. The government within the region was then accountable only to the British Parliament in England.

Further more, Africans felt that the impact of the church on society was generally weak. It has failed to recognise the cherished African communal living. Conversion came to mean rejecting ones family and ethnic association ; therby upsetting the social and cultural balance of the African society. In view of this development, the need for cultural as well as spiritual revolution was necessitated so as to help restore confidence and peace into the distrubed society.

The demand for a cultural revival within the church setting should not be viewed as reactionary to the established order ; and it should not be seen as a way of adulterating Christianity. As it is obvious, we cannot deny the fact that African norms and tradition still feature in our churches, and if that the case, why then can we not integrate the prevailing culture into the main stay of the church ? Although it may be argued that it will amount to defacing Christianity and as well breed syncretistic tendency,

on the other hand too, will not the missionary venture if vigorously pursued not amount to killing the culture of the people? To kill a culture you have to kill the bearers of that culture. That is to say the life stance and world view of a people are deeply ingrained and not readily changed. To have life depend on these defences and as we have already said, pressure to destroy them often succeeds only in driving them underground. Much of a people's culture is therefore outside rational consciousness. It is transmitted from "unconscious" to "unconscious" as well as from rational conscious to rational conscious. To stamp out a culture and its world view would require total genocide or total and permanent separation of all bearers and receivers.⁸

In attempt to reclaim the past, swift efforts were made and this led to the promulgation of a new law in Zaire. As expressed by Hasting, Christian names were abolished forthwith, only purely African names were henceforth to be used.⁹ This development was a welcome exercise in most part of Africa, for we saw the emergence of various traditional names which are self encoding and decoding. Among such names were Babatunde meaning the dead father has reincarnated. While Iyabo another prominent name among the Yoruba speaking population of Africa meant the dead mother has chosen to come back into the world and usually into the same lineage.

Apparently, names like Jack, Stone and other Biblical names such as Matthew and James were dropped. In the words of President Mobutu of Zaire, "Our ancestors never had such names, authentic African cultural and authentic African names must now reappear from beneath that cultural imperialism of the West with which Christians have undoubtedly been most closely linked".¹⁰

At the very beginning in the history of the church, there was the intolerant rejection of African experience which has now become a heritage of the church in Africa and up to the present time. Then, there was the expressed fear that too much familiarity with African culture would sap the essential Christian flavour from the church's being and existence, and there is the constant insistence that the church must maintain its distinct identity and be different from the cultural environment on which it finds itself.¹¹ Evidence of this may be found in the church's over cautious attitude bordering on fear and its grudging acceptance of elements of African culture into its life and worship.

The expressed fear was a right step in the right direction, yet this fact has to be established, how much or how little and what kind of traditional belief should be allowed to survive in Christianity though, we are clamouring for the integration of our

culture into the main stay of christianity ? This is a modern problem in most Aladura and other spiritual churches. Some argue that unless Christianity takes on aspect of the people it is converting, it will never become firmly established but always remain foreign and without roots.

We need ask, is it not good for Christianity to remain foreign, thus helping to protect the true state of the religion ? What shall we achieve all in the name of wanting to Africanize Christianity and in the end we miss the essence of religion ? If in the process of wanting to adapt African culture, we ended up breeding apostasy will God be happy about the quest of an African ? Apostasy is something that God abhor so we should not draw toward that goal for whatever our reasons may be. The genuineness of our quest is relative for human understanding and need. But God is transcendental so we need to adhere strictly with His dictates.

Some people are of the opinion that unless fusion is achieved carefully, Christianity may lose its vital essence and be overwhelmed by paganism. The expressed fears are good, but we need state clearly that nowhere is 'pure' Christianity to be found. Those who oppose syncretism in Africa are eager to establish another syncretistic form of Christianity as orthodox, as the norm, and label anything else "hersy".

3. The Rite of Naming a Child in an African Independent Church :

As a casual observer, one may rightly observe that some elements which have African trait are used in such churches. In view of such use such observer may readily come to the conclusion that such a church in their mind, owe so much to traditional religion hence, they may conclude that they are practising paganism with a borrowed Christian veneer.¹²

Naming ceremony is among the rite of passage of individual in African context. It is an event which is never taken slightly. It is a moment whereby divine names will be bestowed upon a new child, and that will remain his/ her name forever. Names are given according to the prevailing circumstances and there are occasions when family Names are resorted to when a new child is born. For example, in a family where their major occupation is Blacksmith work, usually the names they will give and bear will have some resemblance with their work. It is this act of naming of people within African context that the missionaries initially went against. They cannot conceive someone who is willing to become

a Christian and still be identified with such names. Worse still, there are some acts that go along with naming of a child in a purely traditional setting. In doing just that, they will consult Orunmila who is the God of all wisdom. It is he who will unveil all that the child has come to do, in other occasions too blood of animals are shed and in other occasion, it may involve an elaborate ritual.

In the appropriation of the missionaries, such act and names must be dropped if one sincerely intends to become a Christian. The unyielding attitude of the missionaries was met with drastic reactions. African refused to yield and things had to drag for a long time. As part of the measures that was adopted by the missionaries in driving home their point was the refusing of children with such names into the missionary schools. This attitude caused a lot of misgiving among the people for in the later stage, force was resulted because the missionaries had the support of the local Chiefs. Those that refused to yield to the persecution eventually withdrew their children from the missionaries schools, hence they turned toward the traditional occupational structure which deals mostly with the apprenticeship scheme.

In naming ceremony within the indigenous churches, the timing varies, for some it is in the evening and for some it is on Sundays after or during the morning service. We need point out that there were lots of variation, so it is not possible to set a standard. All that is important is that names will be administered on the child by the leader or minister in charge and prayers afterward will be offered for the new child. An important thing to note is that prayers as offered defers considerably from the known conventional prayers of the Europeans. The type of prayers often offered are the encoded indigeniously offered prayers that touch all aspect of life of a person.

In naming a child within the celestial church of Christ and as well in Cherubim and Seraphim church and even within the Roman Catholic Church at least within Ilorin township, in Kwara State, the following are some of the objects that are used : Salt, Honey, Sugar Cane, Dried Fish, Palmoil, Aligator Pepper, Bitter Cola and Water. These objects have some religious importance, and it is in the light of this importance that the act of using them is perpetuated till to date. This will rather call for a cultural revolution within the church of God among the Africans.

Apparently most of the things that are African in nature are conceived to be bad, but true to a fact, not all these thing are bad, afterall, the church whether we accept it or not is thriving relatively because of some basic things which are African in nature. Church in this respect is not only relative to the indigenious

spiritual ones but it cut across orthodox as well as protestant churches. Long before now African materials are not to be found within church premises. Although that was the order, but in practical terms, this was not so, for we find in the churches African drums and a host of other things. We need ask, are those objects not from African background? Apparently one can argue otherwise, the presence of those concrete object may not inhere a sincere worship but with edible objects, it will go a long way to influence the course of action within the church of God.

4. An Attempt to Decode the Meaning and Importance of Such Objects :

Salt :- Purely in traditional setting, it is seen as object that can be used to preserve things thereby making them to last longer for later use. The importance of salt is even stressed in area of cooking as done by women. No woman will cook without making use of salt, because of its importance to the food that is being prepared. Therefore when it is used in naming a newly born child, it has an implied meaning and that is, the salt will serve as a preserver of the child's life for a longer period in the harmful world of ours. Salt by nature cannot go bad, therefore, they are wishing that the child will never go bad in his/ her conduct in relation to others. Also, salt is a thing that every woman seek for, the child will be a source of joy and blessing to as many people as he/she may come into contact with.

Apparently within the traditional worship where ritual is instituted, they also make use of salt. The use of salt in that context defers to what obtains within the church set up. In the church, they are a bit restrictive in the way and manner in which they conduct themselves, at least a time of distinction can be drawn effectively when we attempt to do that with a view of bringing out the prevailing differences in the use of those objects.

Honey :- It has a sweet nature, inspite of its sweetness, flies or ants cannot draw near it else, they get stuck to it and die. When such object is used in naming a child, they are only drawing on the spiritual significance that whoever attempts to harm the child will invariably die and more importantly, they are of the hope that the child will experience a sweet stay and a preserved life on earth.

The Dried Fish :- It carries much and deeper meaning. A close observation of the life of a fish in the water will reveal to us as to why such is used in naming a child. While a fish goes about in the water, they never catch cold and that there are no obstacles

on their ways, they have ability to move about freely in search of what they will eat. The life of the new child is depicted with the life of a fish. They in using that wish that the child will not experience cold in his earthly pursuit and that in his/her search for basic needs, there shall be no problems.

Aligator peppers :- By nature, it has three sections within, and all are packed full with seeds. In making use of this object, in naming a child, they are drawing on its implied meaning that the child whether male or female will not be barren in the world. Often it is always stressed that there has never been a given occasion that such a fruit never carry seeds, if that is the case, the child they pray and wish that he/she will never be barren. In another dimension, the three sections signify the kinds of enemy that we all shall contend with; one, enemies from one's fathers house, two, enemies from ones mother's house, and three, friends who are one's enemy. In offering of such prayer, they ask for victory over the child's foe as long as he/she will remain on earth.

Bitter Cola:- It is one whole which signifies a ripe and good old age for the child. It also depicts a sense of unity between the baby and the community into which he/she is entering; the child is assured of moral, physical, social as well as spiritual support of the larger society as when need will arise.

Plam Oil :- It has so many uses, but it is called (Eru) something that can ease problems. In using it, is implied that the child will have a easy stay on earth. Cola in its own right is said to drive away evil things away from the child, while water is to forewarn the child that it rains, so he/ she must set to work irrespective of the season.

Above all regarding the use of all those objects, some are not directly administred to the children, often some of them are passed on to the mother and inturn during breast feeding the baby will have it's own share. Invariably, it is discovered that most of the materials used are sweet in nature, and the reason as given was to encourage as much as possible the child to stay back and live among people. The conception within the African background is that if the child is exposed to hardship early in life, the child may decide to go back. To forstal the likelihood of going back, the child is drawn into the sweetness of the human world.

In concrete terms, the Aligator pepper is made use of to teach lesson of what the human world is all about. When one ordinarily takes the seed, it usually have a sharp taste, but when one draws is air through the mouth, it tastes sweet. The human world is not always a bed of roses, there are occasions when thing go sharp, but not forever.

The use of those objects within the identified churches is enough for us to castigate them. We need to commend their courage in adapting their culture into Christianity. It does not also imply that such churches are no longer adoring or giving God his due position in the scope of things. Rather the attempt is a pointer for cultural revolution within the church of God.

5. Conclusion :

Now as the Christians became better acquainted with non-Christian religious traditions, they from within and without should learn to respect them and discover many positive aspects in them. It was not long before theology caught up with development in the study of religions and began to advocate a more discerning attitude, culminating in the new and highly positive approach of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration of the church's relation with non-Christian religions. In a striking sentence, the Second Vatican Council asked Christians "to acknowledge, preserve and promote" the spiritual and moral values of non-Christian religions, and to do this through dialogue and collaboration.¹³

To Africanize Christianity, both traditional religion and the doctrine of the Christian churches must be examined carefully and systematically and the areas of agreement and conflict are carefully defined and demarcated. African traditional concepts should be properly watched and allowed to go side by side with Christianity. A more sophisticated view of traditional religion was needed so that it is no longer seen as a collection of practices and beliefs considered at best bizarre and at worst dangerous.¹⁴

To advocate for cultural revolution, it must be God-guided and caution must be exercised because it may become unprecedently difficult to establish a limit where excesses may set in. With diligence and God's guiding, the limit will not be exceeded. This when achieved will pave way for Africanization of Christianity as it is presently done in Aladura as well as other related spiritual churches.

To stand aloof and reprove any person's culture or religion is not to do justice to one's sense of value and appreciation. African religious practices must come into force within Christianity so as to make the religion more meaningful to its adherents all over the region. With the introduction of those elements into the church system is indeed a reawakening process for the African culture that has long been driven into the cooler.

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