

**CHRISTIAN TESTIMONY IN THE FACE OF AFRICAN
TRADITIONAL RELIGION
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INTRODUCTION: I was asked to present a brief paper on Christian testimony in the face of African Tradition religion. It was not easy for me to prepare this paper for two simple reasons; the first being that I am a Bangwa man and the second being that I not only a Christian, but am the Bishop of Mamfe. The difficulty of the first flows from the fact that as a Bangwa man who grew out of the village, I was going to be speaking about a topic to people, some of whom knew it better than myself. The difficulty of the latter flows from the fact that as a Catholic Christian and the Bishop of Mamfe, I had to be careful not make pronouncements that would push the Bangwa Christian into some form of religious syncretism. In my person is found the duality of the problem that we are trying to solve, viz, the problem of the African who becomes a Christian.

I want to start this presentation by drawing inspiration from a paper presented by Richard Chowning about the Similarities between Christianity and Africa Traditional Religion.

➤ **Creator God**

- The supreme being in most African Traditional Religions is seen as the creator of humans and all other living things. This supreme being is viewed in different forms and has diverse dwelling places, yet he is the almighty.
- He is often distant from humans because of something humans have done to him.
- There is much discussion among African theologians and missionaries concerning whether or not the creator God of various African Traditional Religion's is Jehovah God.

➤ **The Presence of Evil**

- Humans are often the battle ground between evil and good forces.
- Humans can also call upon evil forces to punish or persecute wrong doers or enemies.

➤ **Unseen Realm**

- In African Traditional Religions there is no division between the seen and the unseen realms. Existence is lived in wholeness of those two realities.
- Christians base their entire faith on the existence of life beyond the physical.
- In both religions the personalities in the seen and unseen realms interact with each other.
- People can move into the unseen realm during dreams, visions, or trances and, of course at death.

➤ **Communication Between the Seen and Unseen**

- Most African Traditional Religions have functionaries who communicate with God and the spirits on behalf of individuals and the community.

- This does not negate the ability of individuals to communicate with the unseen. These functionaries are trained and initiated. In many cases, they are from a bloodline that has a special window into the unseen realm.
- Communication takes many forms. Chief among them are prayers, incantations, sacred objects, and incense.
- Christians profess to have God's ear, He is always ready to listen. They communicate with Him through the Holy Spirit.

Other aspects include emphasis on community and the existence of a covenant between God and man.

I have decided to make my talk more practical than theoretical and I have also decided to examine this topic within three different periods; The pre-Focolare period, The last fifty years and the post golden Jubilee era. Instead of talking about the African traditional Religion in general, I prefer to limit myself to the traditional religion in Lebiale division and most of the time, to traditional religion of the Bangwa man in whose context we are celebrating this symposium of dialogue between traditional and Christian religion.

I. PRE-FOCOLARE PERIOD

1. **Witnessing of the first Christians:** The traditional Bangwa man is basically religious and before the advent of Christianity, he practiced his traditional religion and prayed to God within the beliefs we stated above, some of which coincided with the Christian beliefs. Christianity came into the Bangwa land through Catechists who had gone down to the coasts to work in the plantations of the Germans. Some of them included Pa Aloys Tembunga, Stanislaus Nkeng, Boniface Nchindia, Aloysius Ngoasong, Francis Awungache, Mathias Anu, Chief Fuankeh etc. When these men returned home, they embarked on the teaching of doctrine and put forth some doctrines that contradicted some elements of the culture. Their new doctrine prohibited the marrying of many wives which was common in the culture, traditional sacrifices and going to juju houses. Many of them faced a steep opposition and even persecution from their villages, but most of them remained faithful in bearing witness to their new faith. It is the fidelity, steadfastness and conviction of some of these early catechists that made Christianity to take root in the Bangwa country in spite the traditional religion of the people.
2. **The early Missionary approach:** As early as 1912, Mgr. Henri Vieter passed through Fontem from Ossing in Mamfe on his way to Dschang. The Mill Hill Missionaries arrived Cameroon in 1922 with Mgr. Campling as their leader and Christianity began to spread rapidly. Fontem was an outstation of Mbetta Parish and the Fathers would come round to

visit. Christianity was presented as an option of two possibilities; You either became a Christian and shun all aspects of traditional religion, or you practice your traditional religion and remain a pagan who was only good enough as fire wood in hell. There was little or nothing like dialogue between Christianity and the culture of the people. Musical Instruments of the culture could not be used in the Churches, music in the local language could not be used in the liturgy, traditional prayers and ancestral worship was regarded as demonic and listening to music coming from the sacred forest of the palace would enable a Christian go to confession before receiving communion during the next visit of the Rev. Father. It was a matter of either or.

3. **New Converts and traditional religious beliefs:** In spite the stiffness and uncompromising methods of the early missionaries, many Lebialem people still embraced Christianity and gave their lives to Christ. However, in spite these conversions, in the face of misfortunes, serious trials and deaths, the typical Bangwa Christian will go to consult sooth sayers, offer sacrifices to their family gods and ancestors and fall back to traditional beliefs. It becomes very difficult therefore for the neophyte to distinguish between what Christianity will consider pagan practices and ordinary culture. Even today as we speak, there are some Christians who are still caught in this delimma. Yet there are other Christians who understand the difference and walk the thin line that separates Christian values from African Traditional religious values. This now is all beginning to change with the advent of inculturation and inter religious dialogue which the Focolare Movement has been championing for the last fifty years in Fontem.

II. THE LAST FIFTY YEARS

1. **The experience of Chiara in the Fontem Palace as the birth of dialogue with African Traditional Religions:** The post conciliar document of the Missional Activity in the Church, *Ad Gentes Divinitus* states that *“In order that they may be able to bear more fruitful witness to Christ, let them be joined to those men by esteem and love; let them acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions; let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows. At the same time, however, let them look to the: profound changes which are taking place among nations, and let them exert themselves to keep modern man, intent as he is on the science and technology of today's world from becoming a stranger to things divine; rather, let them awaken*

in him a yearning for that truth and:charity which God has revealed. Even as Christ Himself searched the hearts of men, and led them to divine light, so also His disciples, profoundly penetrated by the Spirit of Christ, should show the people among whom they live, and should converse with them, that they themselves may learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth.” (AG No. 11). This ties in line with what Chiara said during her maiden visit to the Fon’s palace in Fontem and her inspiration for interreligious dialogue. She said “All at once, I had a strong impression of God, like a huge sun, embracing all of us, we and they, with his love. For the first time in my life, I intuited that soon we would be involved also with people of non-christian religion”.(Essential Writings p.344).

Ignited by Vatican II and the intuition of its founder, the Focolare Movement has been a source of light for the dialogue between Christianity and traditional religions. The Movement has accomplished a lot, especially in giving dignity to traditional religion and establishing mutual respect between the adherents of both religions. This is the new way that has characterized the last fifty years since the arrival of the Movement in Fontem and this is what we are celebrating today.

2. Traditional Religious beliefs practiced the Bangwa Christian: The traditional Bangwa man practices certain religions rites that are so steeped in his culture that even as a Christian, he finds it impossible to depart from them. We shall classify this between what is allowed and what is not allowed.

i. Traditional Prayer (Feh Mboh): The traditional prayer in which the Lebialemese cups his both hands and recites certain prayers, invoking the “living dead” of the family to intercede for them and bring blessings upon them, is one of the most common practices that stays with every Bangwa man, Christian or non Christian. The Christian man says these prayers as intercessions in the light of the Christian spirit and they blow into the air to shower in blessings. There is nothing wrong with this.

ii. Remembering their dead: The whole notion of remembering their dead is one aspect that is embedded in the bangwa culture and beliefs. This is known as “cry die”. Cry die is a good and noble practice of remembering our dead, after all the church has dedicated the whole month of November to the memory of the dead and Christians are encouraged to go and pray in cemeteries. The typical Bangwa man feels the obligation to organize cry die for his dead relatives and this good. But we must baptize this

practice with our motivation for the celebration of cry die. For the Christian, we remember our dead and we pray for them to be released from their sins and brought to heaven. We celebrate the lives of these departed relatives in thanksgiving to God for who they were to us and the legacy they left behind. There should be in a Christian a departure from the non Christian belief that we must organize cry die for our departed relatives, otherwise we shall have misfortunes. This is superstitious. This is why Christians are encouraged at all times to begin their cry die with the Holy Mass which is the sacrifice of the memorial of the passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- iii. **Marriage rites and customs:** The belief of the traditional African regarding Marriage is that once the traditional rites have been performed, a man and woman are considered husband and wife. The Church goes further to say that a union that has not been sacramentalised cannot be considered as a marriage. The testimony of a Christian in the face of this traditional practice is to sacramentalise their union before they start living together as husband and wife. This witnessing further demands that Christians respect the marriage regime of Monogamy in every Christian marriage, while still respecting non Christians who are involved in polygamous unions.
- iv. **Titles and jujus:** Traditional titles of honour and harmless juju societies for social purposes are not imcompartible with Christian beliefs. It is therefore possible to hold the title of a chief, a notable or a compound head, and still be a good Christian, avoiding all the practices that will make your Christianity a window dressing.

3. What aspects of Traditional Religion must a Christian shun?

- i. **Any Sacrifice involving Blood:** Hebrews 13:12 says that Jesus had to shed his blood outside for the forgiveness of sins. This means that no Christian is allowed to take part in any sacrifice that involves the use of blood, whether of fowls, goats, human etc. Once it comes to this, the Christian is required to give firm testimony in his faith in the salvific power of the blood of Jesus. The Christian does not need not only not to take part but must avoid to be present when such sacrifices are made.
- ii. **Divination and necromancy :**Divination and the consultation of the dead are aspects of traditional religious practices which cannot involve the Christian. The Christian

has faith in the divine will of God for him and so the Christian needs to stand firm and what ever happens to them, believe in what St. Paul says; “In everything give thanks for it is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you”.

- iii. **Non-Christian burials for notables and chiefs:** Non Christian burial rites for notables and chiefs does not show respect and give dignity to the body of the deceased which is honourably put back to the soil from which it came. Christians who accept some of these titles which imply desecration of the human body after death ought to make in clear in their last wills that they should be given Christian burials and if the title absolutely negates the according to Christian burials to people of such ranks, then the Christian is bound both in duty and conscience not to accept such titles.
- iv. **Witchcraft and secret societies:** Witchcraft is evil and a manifestation of the devil in society. So no matter what arguments are advanced for witchcraft, it cannot be good. Is it possible that someone can believe in God, be a Christian and still practice witchcraft? This in itself is a contradiction in terms.

III. POST GOLDEN JUBILEE PERIOD

1. **A True inculturated Christianity (Liturgical and Theological)**

Inculturation has to do with adapting Christian practice to the cultures of the people in a particular locality. The people must recognize themselves at worship and not make Christianity impose a duality on their lives. The Vatican II document on the liturgy says that “*Even in the liturgy, the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not implicate the faith or the good of the whole community; rather does she respect and foster the genius and talents of the various races and peoples. Anything in these peoples' way of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error she studies with sympathy and, if possible, preserves intact. Sometimes in fact she admits such things into the liturgy itself, so long as they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit.*”(SC.32). This inculturation must be both theological and liturgical, in the way the people understand God and in the way they worship God. This is the way forward.

2. **Continued Meaningful and Fruitful Dialogue:** The Christian must continue in meaningful and fruitful dialogue at all times with non Christian religions. *“The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men”.* (Nostra Aetate No.2)
3. **Love as the basis of all relationships between believers, Christian or non Christian.** Chiara tells us that *“Our work with many brothers and sisters of the major religions and the brotherhood we experience with them has convinced us that the religious pluralism of humanity can lose much of its negative value as an instigator of division and war so as to acquire in the awareness of millions of men and women a sense of challenge: that of restoring unity to the human family because the Holy Spirit is present and active in some way in every religion, and not just in the individual members but also within the religious tradition itself”* (Essential writings p.347). The challenge of the Christian in the next fifty years is to know that the credibility of his Christianity depends on how much he loves, irrespective of religion; just as Christ says *“(And they’ll know we are my disciples if you love one another(John 13:35)*

V: CONCLUSION: In conclusion, the Christian in the face of traditional religion must know that they cannot be like the traditional juju with two faces, the Christian face and the non Christian face. They must also remember that they must be authentically Christian and still remain authentically Africans. This means that the African Christian can truly live within his culture as an African, rising above the negative values of tradition that Christ has purified with the values of the gospel. Thank you.