



**TRANSFORMING DEVELOPMENT**  
**Exploring Approaches to Development from Religious Perspectives**  
**International Conference – Soesterberg, Netherlands**  
**October 15-17, 2007**

**ALTERNATIVE VISION FOR TRANSFORMING DEVELOPMENT:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM CHRISTIANITY WITH PARTICULAR  
REFERENCE TO NEW CHRISTIAN EXPRESSIONS IN AFRICA**

**By**

**PHILOMENA NJERI MWAURA**  
**KENYATTA UNIVERSITY, NAIROBI, KENYA**

**Introduction**

The centrality of religion to social, economic, political and cultural activities in Africa is a given and is well documented. Africa is a continent with mainly a triple religious heritage namely African indigenous religion, Islam and Christianity. Nevertheless, despite the preponderance of Christianity and Islam, African indigenous spirituality continues to survive in people's imagination influencing their value systems, self-identity and behaviour. The African still lives in a web of relationships that are in continual interaction. As Bujo insightfully observes "According to African people's belief, not only human beings influence each other, but all forces possess a casual and ontological interdependence (...) All things can be traced to the highest being, who created everything."<sup>1</sup>

Since the interaction between western Christianity and culture and African religion and culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, new Christian expressions that are indigenized and that consciously rejected western ecclesial models and forms of being Christian have evolved. This has culminated in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and up to the present in the evolvement of the more recent forms of Pentecostal / charismatic Christianity that is too reshaping the Christian landscape in Africa. This rapid growth of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America has been described by scholars of religion, theologians and missiologists as a shift of the center of the gravity of Christianity from the north to the south.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Benezet Bujo, *Ethical Dimensions of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, Africa, 1998: 16.

<sup>2</sup> Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story*. Pretoria: Department of Church History, University of Pretoria, 2005: 24-25.

This rapid growth of Christianity in Africa has occurred in a context of pauperization of the continent due to a myriad of factors which include poor leadership and governance, militarization of the society, economic collapse, abuse of human rights, corruption, crippling foreign debt, debilitating disease such as HIV/AIDS and rising poverty. The question therefore arises; in a continent that is noted for its religiosity what role does religion play in inculcating values that can be a catalyst for social, political, and economic transformation? Or is it religion that is the problem? Is this religion an outward ritualistic expression without requisite morality and spirituality?

The role of religion in development and transformation of societies has been acknowledged.<sup>3</sup> Religion is said to hold a key role in formulating a society's cosmic view regulating the way individuals perceive society and their specific role in it. It is in this way that religion is said to perform the function of social control.

It specifies particular norms and values which themselves control private and public life. These moral norms are enjoined on the people as requirements of a higher supernatural order. In this sense, religion serves to legitimize the purpose and procedures of society.

Religion is the most powerful, deeply felt and influential force in human society, especially in Africa. As an outstanding component of the social structure, it shapes people's relationships, responses, and reactions which influence the individuals, family, community and beyond. Religion provides powerful emotional symbols of group identity which bring people together even in the midst of great opposition. Religion has the potential to liberate, empower and restore people's dignity. It supplies a special kind of moral anchorage which society yearns for. It provides meaning to life offering people hope, faith, and courage to overcome life's obstacles. Embedded in the core of religion is the capacity to therefore mobilize society and individuals for positive transformative action.

Religion has also been described as a double edged sword. Although it has a potent for mobilizing people and sustaining their unity against any form of oppression, it can also cause conflict or be used as a tool of oppression. It has a fissiparous quality. It can create boundaries between people as well as bind them. The negative aspects of religion are however not our concern in this paper but its capacity for positive transformation of individuals, communities and nations.

This paper explores the concept of development in Christianity focusing on how the newer expressions of Christianity in Africa perceive development and the activities they engage in to achieve it. It specifically explores the spiritual and other cultural recourses employed by the churches and the kind of models they have evolved. The paper begins by discussing what these groups are and their different manifestations, and the ethic that underlines their development responses. Illustrations will be drawn from churches in Kenya and the activities of the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) which has its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. Before discussing this however, I will briefly explore the concept of Transformative Development as it relates to Christianity.

### **Defining Transformative Development**

Development is a complex term. Because of the ideological, cultural and religious differences, there has been no common understanding on what development entails and how it could be measured. For many years, the economic aspect of development was emphasized at the expense of cultural and spiritual aspects. In view of establishing a balanced teaching about development, Pope Paul VI wrote: "Development cannot be limited to mere economic growth. In order to be authentic, it must be integral, that is, it has to promote the good of each individual and of the whole person."<sup>4</sup> In this teaching, Paul VI brings material and spiritual values together. The lack of consensus in defining development arises from a false separation between the spiritual and economic dimensions. With an apt awareness of this complexity, The Report of the

---

<sup>3</sup> Gerrie Ter Haar and Stephen Ellis, "The Role of Religion in Development: Towards a New Relationship between the European Union and Africa," *The European Journal of Development Research*, vol 8,3, September 2006: 351 -367

<sup>4</sup> Pope Paul VI *Populorum Progressio*, Nairobi: Pauline's Publications Africa, 1967 No. 14.

South Commission defines development as a process which enables human beings to realize their potential, build confidence and lead lives of dignity and fulfillment. It is a process which frees people from exploitation. It is a movement away from political, economic or social oppressions<sup>5</sup>. As Tarimo further argues, "Through development, political independence acquires its true significance. And it is a process of growth, a movement essentially springing from within the society that is developing."<sup>6</sup>

Development enlarges people's choices and participation by providing a quality of life that includes access to employment opportunities, education, health, political freedom, a safe environment and economic prosperity.

It must be evaluated not merely by the increase in individual incomes but also by the expansion of social services. A balanced definition of development must therefore express a wish to live a better life. For this reason, economic development entails human growth towards fulfillment in search of a good life and happiness. We agree with Tarimo that for Africa: ".....The concept of development ought to be understood in terms of a liberation process in which the whole person and the entire community are involved. Such an integral definition calls us to approach development as an active transformation of society which not only ensures that everybody has the basic necessities of life, but that the decision – making processes in society are genuinely participatory. Development then, is a multi-dimensional revolution, economic, social and cultural, to release and mobilize the energies and potentialities of the people."<sup>7</sup>

We can safely conclude that development must be understood as a human urge for liberation and growth into fullness of life. The kind of development needed in Africa is one that will result in the release and mobilization of the energies and potentialities of the people for the production of goods, development of all human faculties, and increase of the services required for the well being of all.

Such development is linked to cultural dynamics, belief systems, social political organization, procedures of wealth accumulation and distribution and the animation of the population to participate fully in the process of production.

Religion and culture are intrinsic to development because "development thinking refers to distillation of reflections on practice into conceptual language, which then expresses wisely in language"<sup>8</sup>

The framework of a people's world view internalizes development aspirations articulated through cultural interests. Development thinking is therefore a means of realizing the world view of a given people. It could be also considered as an epistemological form unfolding cultural energy, motivation and vision of life. Understanding a world view, involves penetrating beneath the external reality in order to find contributing factors that influence the external reality. It is almost penetrating the structure of ideas that influence people to do what they do and the manner in which they do it.

Tarimo argues that the fundamental problem behind Africa's developmental crises is neither economical nor political. These are symptoms, for the problem is basically cultural, especially when certain cultural traditions are perceived as inflexible. Mugambi agrees that cultural reconstruction and ideological transformation must be done in order to change the situation at the level of the mind.<sup>9</sup> The evolvement of transformative developmental processes in Africa require changes in cultural processes and promotion of those features of traditional cultures and

---

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development*, London: Zed Books, 1997: 130-138

<sup>6</sup> Aquiline Tarimo, *Applied Ethics and Africa's Social Reconstruction*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005:12

<sup>7</sup> Tarimo, *Applied Ethics*, 13

<sup>8</sup> Jesse N.K. Mugambi, "African Theologians and Reconstruction of Africa's Social Consciousness

<sup>9</sup> Chris Sudgen, "Transformational Development: current states of understanding and practice" *Transformation an International Dialogue on Mission and Ethics*, 20, 2, (APM) 2003): 700

spirituality considered to be positive through a constructive dialogue between African intellectual community and Africa's cultural and religious heritage.

Christianity which we have already noted is one of the dominant religions in Africa, has been involved in economic development under the influence of the spirituality of integral development. It has played a positive role especially in the areas of education, health and poverty alleviation. In different ways the mainline Christian churches are growing in their attitude towards democratization by playing an active role in shaping Africa politically and economically. Such an engagement demonstrates that religion is a vehicle of social change and economic progress. Christian concerns of development coincide with the vision of viewing reality as a process of salvation, the realization of God's Kingdom on earth.

Chris Sugden argues that the term development has been replaced with transformation viewing the latter as a set of principles against which any theory of development may be measured.<sup>10</sup> According to Vinny Samuel, quoted by Sugden, "transformation is to enable God's vision of society to be actualized in all relationships, social economic and spiritual, so that God's will may be reflected in human society and his love be experienced by all in the community, especially the poor".<sup>11</sup>

Sugden suggests certain components of transformation as follows:

- *"A new creation"*, based on Thessalonians 3:12-13, in which transformation reflects the new that has already come and the passing of the old.
- *The centrality of the cross in the process of transformation*. The unconditional love and the suffering of Jesus on the cross usher in new possibilities including liberating the poor people from the obstacles that control their lives.

Therefore the cross opens the way for Reconciliation not only between Jesus Christ and humanity but also between persons and between them and the environment.

- *The need for the integral relation between evangelism and social action*.
- *Mission as witness and journey*. The idea of transformation is perceived as a kind of journey which people are called to join at personal and communal levels being witness to the lordship of God and making use of their abilities and gifts.
- *Stewardship as the content of God's image in humanity requiring access to material resources and thus equality of opportunity*.
- *Shalom*, which is witnessed in healthy human relationships (I Kings 5:12), well being (Genesis 37:4), prosperity (Jeremiah 33:6,9) and moral character (Psalms 37:37).
- *Freedom* which is about the ability to be yourself, have self worth and self esteem supported by relationship to others.

These components identified by Sugden can be considered as a basis for a spirituality of transformative development.

It is worth noting that some African theologians like Tarimo and Mugambi believe that African Christianity has created no significant social economic impact and thereby no real transformation. This is due to its foreignness, making evangelization synonymous with erecting church buildings and mass conversions. The separation of Christian piety expressed in church attendance and prayers from a morally transformed character imbued with gospel values, has been blamed for the apparent hypocrisy exhibited by a large number of Christians.<sup>12</sup>

However, this pessimism notwithstanding Christianity has contributed to social economic transformation in Africa. In many countries the church is the only credible and sustainable service provider creating an alternative society guided by the biblical vision of liberation and God's option

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 71

<sup>11</sup> Tarimo, *Applied Ethics*, 25

<sup>12</sup> R.D.N Dickinson, *To Set at Liberty the Oppressed*, Geneva: WCC, 1975: 50

for the poor. The newer African Christian churches have been credited with being rooted in culture and that their interventions in the social economic sphere are underpinned by African spirituality. It is to these churches and their involvement in development that we shall now turn

### **New African Christian Expressions of Christianity, and their view of Development.**

As noted earlier, new forms of Christian expression of Christianity in Africa churches have existed since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The most representative forms are the African Initiated Churches(AICs) comprising the Ethiopian/Nationalist types and the Spiritual/ Roho/ Zionist/ Apostolic or Aladura churches. They have been defined as autonomous groups with all African membership and all African leadership. Partly these churches have arisen as a result of secession from western mission founded churches, but partly also from spontaneous initiative of charismatic African leaders. The emergence of these churches is characterized by a number of sociological, theological, political, economical, cultural and other factors. The AICs strongly emphasise the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, the authority of the Bible as God's word and as the yard stick of faith and morals and the building of a community structured on spiritual kinship.

These churches represent what Dickson describes as, "A manifestation of Christianity Consistent with their own unique historical experience, rooted self consciously in their unique cultures and contributing to a richer world-wide interaction of the gospel."<sup>13</sup>

These churches represent over14% of all Christian in Africa. Emerging in the colonial period and surviving to this day amidst further growth, the churches were opposed to missionary paternalism and insensitivity to their cultures and world view. They were also movements of resistance against the wider project of harnessing the African continent, its resources and its people, to the glory, self aggrandizement and financial profit of metropolitan countries<sup>14</sup>.

The spiritual AICs rejected the values of colonial society which they perceived as tainted and a threat to the integrity and purity of African society. As far as they could, they created Christian societies that were counter cultures to colonial society. Both types of churches "were concerned about re-asserting local control over society, its values, its moral sanctions and its access to the Divine and spiritual power".<sup>15</sup>

In traditional African societies the roles of access to Divine power and blessings were laid down by local leaders and priests who were regarded as mediators between human beings and the supernatural. The Christian gospel offered a new and superior power that of the Holy Spirit of the one God himself.

According to Wambugu and Padwick the founders of AICs , "In seeking to define their own vision, created vibrant indigenous churches, self reliant born and natured within African culture and living out the gospel with relevance in their own particulars contexts. In reflecting on their struggles in the light of the scriptures, the founders developed a way of life and faith that was not articulated in books of theology instead it was to be found in songs, stories, forms of worship dance, church uniforms, flags, names in laws of impurity, concepts of evil and practice of exorcism, uniforms, traditions and narratives of preaching and prayer, in dream interpretation and prophecies and in understanding of healing and salvation".<sup>16</sup>

This multifaceted expression of AIC faith is what the OAIIC calls the, **founding vision** and it underpins and influences their attitude towards the world and initiatives in individual and communal transformation. It can be regarded as their spirituality and ethic. Wambugu and Padwick summarize the spirituality that informs their response to human need and life's challenges, and that is also informed by the founders' vision in the following words:

---

<sup>13</sup>Njeru Wambugu and John Padwick, "Globalization: Perspective from the African Independent Churches," *Journal of African Instituted Church Theology*. 11, 1,2006: 61

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, 61

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 62

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 63

*“ Followed by challenges (of globalization), we can still follow the example of founders of two or three generations ago: we can stand as they did, in the midst of crises, within our own cultures, and seek guidance from the Holy Spirit and the word of God for a renewed vision. If we are true both to the Gospel and to our current situation, this vision will be significantly different from that of our founders. Indeed, it must be so in order to empower us effectively with the new and serious challenges we face.”<sup>17</sup>*

What have the AICs done to transform their members' lives and communities? Most AICs are churches of the poor. They live in the urban and rural areas. Their approach to the world has significantly changed. When for example the spiritual churches emerged at the beginning and middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their ethic (at least, some of them) centered on the belief that they were living in the time of the end after which God would inaugurate “a new heaven and a new earth”. Before this everyone will account for this life (Matt. 25:31-46). The present life was regarded as transitory and therefore one should lead a life that will eventually lead him/her to acquire his/her own salvation and not get involved with a world that was ending. This however did not entail total withdrawal from reality for they also heeded Paul's command in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, “if anyone will not work, let him not eat.” Hence while they preserved themselves for the second coming of Christ, and the final judgment, they were expected to participate in productive activities for their material welfare.

There was and still is a general belief among them that salvation can only be attained through continued good work. Hence the people of the spirit, as , they are generally called in Eastern Africa, were expected to preach , study the Bible and be attentive to the needs of their families and fellow believers. Each individual was expected do his/her work whether religious or secular and do God's work as well. Every activity was to be done for God's glory. If a person attains this balance in his/her life, he/she would have unbound happiness in the new world as well.<sup>18</sup> The “people of the spirit” did not see their secular lives as separate from their religious ones. To be a member of the new life also meant spiritual advancement and a practical orientation towards this life. With time the churches became involved in community activities aimed at uplifting their social and economic welfare.

These churches are the “salt of the earth” in their communities. Through creative cultural hermeneutical processes, they preserve what is good in African culture, they mediate healing where people are hurting due to various problems and they draw people to faith in Jesus and the full life the he promises his followers.

The concepts of Ubuntu and peace so important in African communities are central to AIC spirituality and idea of the good life. Ubuntu is a concept that depicts personhood and humaneness. It expresses the ontology of people and their identity. It is a cultural and ethical worldview. It is expressed in the saying, “I am because we are and because we are therefore I am”. The meaning and essence of Ubuntu is the inclusiveness and interrelatedness of all reality. It finds resonance with the biblical story of creation in which God created humanity in relationship and in the New Testament vision of restoration of all things to God. This implies:

*“Being human is relational and cooperative...the concrete person is a web of interactions, a network of operative relationships. A person is fashioned by historical , cultural, genetic, biological, social, and economic infrastructure. These relationships are not mechanical ones: they do not allow for competitive individualization which would damage the dignity of the human being. The dignity of human beings emanates from the network of relationships, from being in community ....”<sup>19</sup>*

---

<sup>17</sup> Philomena N. Mwaura, “African Instituted Churches and Social Economic Development”, M.Theuri and G.Wamue (eds.), *Quests for Integrity in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.crvp.org>

<sup>19</sup> Jocelyn Murray, “Kikuyu Spirit Churches”

In this sense, every person's humanity is ideally articulated through his/her relationship with other human beings, the earth and other creatures of the earth. Ubuntu expresses respect, empathy and compassion for others. A number of attributes associated with Ubuntu are solidarity, and the collective consciousness of the African people, the essence of being, communalism and the care and nurture of the earth and African ethics of life.

The centrality of the idea of community in AICs is evident in worship and relationship with one another. Given the pressures on traditional society in modern Africa, this attempt to create a sense of community in AICs is of great significance. As Jocelyn Murray observed about the Akurinu of Central Kenya, they had created a "church tribe", in which unlike in the traditional community where relationships and social bonds were dependent on kinship, members are tied together by a common faith.<sup>20</sup> These communities are reminiscent of the early Christian communities where there was mutual concern for all and sharing. This ethic is also derived from African communitarian values. This is the framework for celebrating life through various social and religious events. The principle of mutual aid in the name of Christian charity governs Church members and it takes several forms depending on the nature of needs.

AICs boast of having been able to finance and manage their social and pastoral responsibilities with no or little help from outside sources. They have been truly self propagating, self reliant and self governing churches. This is not to say that they have not encountered challenges along the way but it shows that people have resources or assets whether social, spiritual or economic that are central to their survival and dignity.

The AICs have closely-knit congregations that constitute their social support system. The OAIC, supports these indigenous community support systems through its Participatory Development and HIV/AIDS programmes. This is done through what they call Building Community Support Systems (BUCOSS). In the words of Wambugu and Padwick:

*We do so by improving the facilitating, networking, and advocacy abilities of church and leaders, and giving them professional skills where appropriate*<sup>21</sup>.

The OAIC has helped member churches and the communities they serve to develop practical and effective responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. They have developed community care support initiatives which are supporting people living with HIV/AIDS, Orphaned and Vulnerable Children and the families affected by AIDS. Church leaders have mobilized their congregations to deal with stigma, understand the causes and effects of HIV/AIDS, developed practical courses of action to release the potential of local congregations and provided integrated responses at the community level, as they provide home based care to PLWHs, educational support to OVCs, and skills in sustainable agriculture and in small businesses for people affected by HIV/AIDS and poverty. According to the General Secretary of the OAIC, "churches and CBOs have begun to mobilize communities to understand their social and spiritual responsibility to support PLWHs, orphans, and other people affected by HIV/AIDS, and to develop strategies for advocacy."<sup>22</sup> The OAIC facilitates member churches to return to the roots of their faith in the founders' visions and the Christian scriptures, and ask them to ensure that their faith is relevant to the challenges they face.

As mentioned earlier, the value of peace is crucial to AIC ethic as they seek to transform their conditions. Peace which is the biblical Shalom and which finds resonance with most African styles of greetings and quest for communal harmony can best be explained by the idea of life in its fullness, the experience of harmony in the community. It speaks of people's relationship with God and with other human beings. AICs, influence society with their emphasis on bringing back Shalom to people and communities that experience conflict, change, and a loss of identity in a turbulent world.

---

<sup>20</sup> Wambugu and Padwick, "Globalisation: A perspective from the African Independent Churches", :70

<sup>21</sup> Wambugu and Padwick, "Globalisation: A perspective from the African Independent Churches", :70.

<sup>22</sup> Wambugu and Padwick, *ibid*, 70

Another important aspect in AIC spirituality is the way they have pragmatically contextualized Christianity in African culture. They believe, (like in traditional African world view) that the world is saturated with wicked spirits who are the causes of misfortunes, failures, illnesses and death. Life is viewed as a continual warfare between malevolent powers emanating from the African world view, Satan and his deamons and the Kingdom of God. The benevolent power of God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit overcomes all forms of evil that causes all types of misfortunes, illness and death. This world view cannot be ignored in any development intervention for it influences people,s responses . It cannot be wished away as superstition or backwardness. Religious beliefs and attendant rituals that are used to confront these fears would be important to engage with even if new explanatory models to interpret the phenomenon are adopted.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the views of Christianity on transformational development using illustrations from the AICs. This type of development is the kind that is also regarded as integral. This is a process by which people gain greater control over themselves, their environment and their future in order to realize the full potential of life that God has made possible. Its characteristics are the fulfillment of needs that are, physical, social psychological, (self-esteem), security, spiritual and purposeful living. Like other Christians, AICs view human growth and attainment of fullness of life as part of God's savific plan for them. Liberation is viewed in both a present and eschatological perspective. God, through Jesus Christ, makes it possible for people to experience social, and cultural- development towards the image of Christ, despite their sinfulness.

AICS have developed a spirituality of resistance against spiritual and material oppression and a spirituality of hope grounded in their faith that God is on their side and understands their plight. They have also developed strategies of empowerment that are social, material, spiritual and skills and knowledge based. Through the OAIC programs, member churches and their leaders have been mobilized, sensitized, and provided with skills to respond to poverty, the impact of HIV/AIDS, and the escalating problem of orphaned and vulnerable children. Their faith gives them the courage to be God's instruments of transformation for individuals and communities.