

Drawing a Connection between Coptic Christianity, their St Mark Tradition, and Contemporary AICs: A Conversation with Coptic Bishop Markos

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Abstract

This article raises a question from the assertions that Mark's memories of his martyrdom can provide an alternative theology for the African Independent Churches (AICs). Can there be a link with the Gospel of Mark from the African perspective? The AICs have been contending with matters of faith and culture, which bear a strong presence in their theology. Much has happened in attempting to answer the questions relating to their faith. This article tries to create an alternative narrative for the makeup of such theology. An interview with Bishop Markos has been a key factor in the founding of such a possibility. To Markos, St Mark, the Egyptian Coptic Church and the ancient Christian experience with their popes and bishops will inform such a theology. They were proud of their linear and orthodox connection to the times of Jesus Christ's earthly ministry two thousand years ago. Egypt and Alexandria—as situated in Africa—have compelled me to test such an allegation. Markos is the author of several books, and he has travelled extensively on the African continent in an attempt to understand the AICs. He introduced and discussed the relationship between Pope Shenouda III and the AICs for the formation of the Organisation of African Independent Churches (OAIC). This essay is an exploration of oral tradition. The Africans' claiming a connection with early Christianity through the Coptic Church has triggered a curiosity to perform more research.

Keywords: African Independent Churches; African memories; celebrate; martyrs; ironies; Ethiopian Habasa; conceptualisation; Sawirus; Synaxaries

Background

When I started to study theology at the University of the North, some years ago, one of the traditional textbooks for the New Testament was *Guide to the New Testament*. Five scholars authored the book: Combrink, H. J. B., De Villiers, J. L., Du Plessis, I. J., Du Toit, A. B., and Voster, W. S. The latter wrote the introduction to Mark based on the literary analysis (Voster

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in Combrink et al. 1983, 102) as a simple sign that there was not enough information at hand to deliberate. Therefore, my New Testament theological view of Mark anchored on such scanty understanding based on the Western epistemological view.

It was when I met Bishop Antonio Markos (Coptic Church, Bishop of African Affairs) for the second time in 2015, that I got a new version of the Gospel of Mark. This gospel is African, as it relates the life of a person who was born, lived and died on the African soil. His story has sparked interest in doing more research, especially originating from the influence of the African Independent Churches (hereafter AICs) and their desperation to improve their theologies. This brings to mind the ironies raised by Oden (2011, 44), for example that:

- a) Mark's birth would take place in the most distant of the three known continents—Africa—and more so, Mark's birth would occur in one of the most remote places in Africa, namely Libya.
- b) Mark's family had to flee from this faraway place to the Vortex of Hebraic culture; the centre of its story, its jurisprudence, its social teachings and its religion.
- c) The young Mark from nowhere became the apostle to everywhere. It is from Libya that he became the universal evangelist.
- d) Geographically, he covered more ground than Paul did by witnessing on all three known continents of the world.
- e) After Mark had travelled all over the eastern Mediterranean world, it is ironic that he would finally revert to his home on the African continent, and bring the early phase of Christian catechesis to its greatest city, Alexandria, the intellectual and academic centre of the Greek world.
- f) The claim regarding Mark as an African would be impossible if it were not believed and communicated through generations by millions of believers.
- g) The traditional birthplace of Mark on the African continent has always been of high importance to the long story of the church of North Africa, and hence to subsequent Christians all over the African continent.

These ironies suggest that something novel was yet to rise following my first lecture. Before that, I had concluded that many African scholars and researchers were not familiar with much of the historical information relating to Mark. The Coptic Church's oral history claims the entire story of Jesus as happening from the year 1–33 AD (Oden 2007, 158) and between the ages 29–33 AD. Furthermore, an entire timeline between the years 1 to 1000 AD is maintained (Oden 2007, 158–197). Hildebrandt (1996) followed the same approach in his book *History of the Church in Africa*; and he presented the same timeline as Oden (2007). He starts from 100 AD up to 1950. The difference was that Hildebrandt wrote his story from a Western perspective, while Oden (2007) wrote from Eastern, Egyptian and Ethiopian orthodox perspectives.

Methodology

This study compelled me to start by proving the Africanness of St Mark. To start a healthy debate about him I had to convince my audience how African Mark was. The only way to exercise that was to present clear proof of his family background until his martyrdom in 68 AD in Alexandria and not Cyrene. In Masri (1987, 1), he is described as one of the diaspora Jews, and that his family was from a wealthy background because they were agriculturists and traders. He was cultured in the Hebrew Scriptures. He lived in Africa and became a refugee in Jerusalem (Oden 2007, 46) since it was much safer than in Cyrenaica. The other source supporting the roots of Mark in Africa is Oden (2011, 21-22), where his early childhood is clearly narrated.

My interest, however, was focused on Mark's story from the beginning, between the years 1 to 100 A.D. up until his martyrdom. My approach will include perspectives of the Western world and the African continent, as it is important for me not to ignore the input by some Western scholars. I carefully incorporated the Coptic claim by Pope Shenouda III and Bishop Antonio's Markos, namely that the lineage of their Christian history connected back to the time of the Jesus movement.

Who is Bishop Markos?

Bishop Markos (hereafter Markos) is the Coptic Bishop for African Affairs and he is a medical doctor. He worked in Ethiopia for several years under the same profession before he became involved with missionary work in Africa. Pope Shenouda III—the 117th Pope of the See of St Mark and the founder of the Organisation of the African Independent Churches (OAIcs) in Egypt in 1978—ordained Markos. This organisation (OAIC) was the established organ for the entire AIC movement in the African continent and diaspora. For this reason, I was curious about the life of Markos, and that has compelled me to do some research on him as well as the Egyptian Coptic Church.

Objective

My interest concerns the story of the lineage and possible AIC link with the Coptic Church's knowledge of ancient African Christianity; with a particular focus on the narrative of St Mark. I interviewed Markos on 23 March 2015 in Johannesburg. One noteworthy fact that came to light in that interview was when he stated that he had worked in Nairobi with David Barrett (1968), the author of *Schism and Renewal in Africa*. Barrett assisted him on how to reach out to the AICs in the continent. Since then he has captured most of his experiences with them and was able to interact meaningfully with them. Although he initially did it for the Coptic Church, it became an opportunity to assist the AICs to rethink their theology more scripturally and less culturally than it is now, at least through the Gospel of Mark.

Literature Review

The validity of my research hypothesis was tested by referring to early written and well-known sources in Africa, like Sundkler's (1964) *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, first published in 1948. It does not mention at all early ancient African Christian initiatives from the first century.

Equally, Sundkler and Steed (2000), in *A history of the Church in Africa*, do not refer much to the ancient African Christian church as a source for AICs in the first century. Barrett (1970, 66), who perceived it first, explained “independence” as the power of the AICs to survive. Furthermore, Barrett (1970) indicated that independence in Africa is an organic phenomenon which has grown continuously since its inception one hundred years ago, prior to the writing of his book. That emphatically confines the emergence of the church in Africa, to at least 1 500 years for the Catholic Church in Central Africa, and 1 600 years ago in Southern Africa. From all of these sources, we have never heard them state that St Mark (the gospel writer) is unequivocally viewed as an African. Indeed, many North Americans would be surprised to learn that Africans were Christians well before 1600, assuming that Christianity in Africa was always the effect of Western missionary activity. In contrast, the Ethiopian Habasa, for example, practise a form of Christianity that predates most forms of European Christianity and is variously called non-Chalcedonian, a monophysite, Coptic, Oriental orthodox or Ethiopian orthodox, currently called the Tawahedo (Galawdewos 2015, 3).

This is in brief what motivated me to explore orthodoxy and its significance in Africa. It is from this background that Markos (2003, 116) raised his concern about the Roman Catholic, Protestant and the AICs’ proliferation, with little evidence of orthodoxy in African Christianity. While acknowledging that the Coptic Church is the “Mother Church of Africa,” the Roman Catholics and Protestants registered palpable anxiety when they questioned the activities of the Copts with the AICs. They expressed concern about Africans “coming to do what” with other Africans, meaning the Copts with the AICs. Indeed, Africa as a vast continent may have various links to the ancient Christian world. For instance, there are different areas of connection by those Africans who were regarded as oral traditionalists, but who are also capable of communicating with each other through symbols. Think of people who were able to brand artefacts and carved wood (Molobi 2014, 122). What is today known as rock engravings (in caves, mountains or rocks) of animals, reptiles and birds in Africa, were not just decorations, but (written) symbols for communication as well (Berger and Hilton-Barber 2002, 29). It was not difficult for Africans to interpret the symbols and objects they were familiar with, and they could even interpret many samples from their ancient world. Given more time, they could have assisted southern Africa to have vastly developed own writing and communication strategies in the far distant areas of the continent and the external worlds. Many of the alleged focus areas still need to be revisited by interested Africans scholars (irrespective of colour and creed) to establish linkages with the African ancient Christian world.

Results

Markos was right when saying that Africans must revisit “in this lawsuit” their ancient African Christianity as their heritage. In celebrating John Mark (or St Mark, as others have known him) such a revisit may be of value, because it seems to be supporting the suggestion of Markos. Egypt was considered the land of idols, more than any other area in Africa. Therefore, Africa, known to be the continent of idols and traditional ancestral beliefs, could learn from Egypt as African Christians to address their critiques.

Furthermore, we appreciate Kato (1985, 43) for stating that:

The African evangelical effort to express Christianity in the context of Africa must make sure that the Bible remains as the absolute source because it is God's written Word to address Africans and all pupils within their cultural background.

In one of his subthemes, "Historical relationship of Christianity and Africa," (Kato 1985, 33) indicated that:

Although in modern times, missionaries from Europe and North America brought the gospel to Africa, they are not the first representatives of Christianity in the continent. In fact, history shows that Christianity's ties are closer with Africa than in Europe or North America.

On the same note, Galgalo (2012, 107-8) concluded that Christianity is widely followed in Africa, yet African Christianity is "superficial" and suffers from serious disconnects at various levels. Given the phenomenal numerical growth in the number of Christians in Africa, there is then the need to seriously revisit the ways the "churches" have conducted and taught theology.

According to Adamo (2006, 117), the New Testament in Africa is mentioned more frequently than any other nation except Israel. Adamo (2005, 7) refers to "African biblical hermeneutics at work." This includes African culture, definitions and the interpreted conditions (Adamo 2005, 7-10). All of these sources actively refer to Christianity that goes beyond colonialism in Africa. In addition, they desire to retrieve it. The name of Pope Shenouda III is important as a possible connection. Pope Shenouda III became a pope following the death of Pope Cyril VI in 1971. During his tenure, the Coptic Church grew significantly all over the world. Pope Shenouda III, known for his commitment to ecumenism since the 1970s, advocated interdenominational Christian dialogue. His writings, teaching and actions were devoted to the understanding of peace, dialogue and forgiveness. At the time of his death (in April 2012), Pope Shenouda III was a Great Patriarch of the ancient Church of Alexandria. He was a famous church father, a teacher, a noted Egyptian leader of the 20th and 21st centuries and a principal defender of the faith.

Pope Shenouda III confirmed the history of Saint Mark the Apostle, who established the Church of Alexandria and the Church in Libya, which was the first among the Pentapolis Church (the five cities in North West Africa), and which extends from Barka eastward to Tunisia westwards. That was the first stage (Markos 1996: preface by Pope Shenouda III). In the 4th century (325 AD), at the time of the Council of Nicea, the Coptic Church had two bishops in Libya. Presently, there are two churches; one in Tripoli and the other in Beni-Gazi. At the time of Saint Athanasius the Apostle, the Coptic Church established the Church in Ethiopia. In the year AD 329, Pope Athanasius consecrated the first bishop to serve there, namely St Fremontious (his name means the man of God). The Ethiopians call him Abba Salama (Markos 2003, 7).

Pope Shenouda III was troubled by the lack of unity and participation in Africa, which prompted him to revive interest in the African Christian Churches. He knew that in addressing

the issue of an independent church for Africans, a thorough understanding of the ancient African Christianity was vital. Self-made leadership camouflaged under apostolic ordination of no legal value bothered him. For instance, among these self-proclaimed leaders are patriarchs, archbishops, bishops, priests, apostles, prophets, or spiritual heads. They gave themselves nonsensical titles such as Vigilant Shepherd (Markos 1996, 143–4). Pope Shenouda III saw it fit to send his Bishop for African Affairs in the early 60s to travel all over the African continent to orientate himself first-hand about who the AICs were and how they guide their churches. The purpose of this was to kindle the interest towards developing the AICs' informed apostolic character; and likewise to tie in the AICs with proper African Christianity since two thousand years ago. The next section will paint a conceptualised impression of the early church.

Conceptualisation

David Bosch gave a comprehensive summary of the Jesus movement as the root of Christianity that would later emerge. The Jesus movement became recognised as a renewal movement within Judaism. Two groups emerged out of the Jesus movement, the “Aramaic” and the “Greek-speaking” Jewish Christians. Meyer (1986, 66) in Bosch (1989) says it was one of the many other Jewish religious parties or factions of the time (like Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes and Pharisees). Most of the Jewish followers of Jesus continued to keep Jewish customs. Many Jewish Christians have taken for granted that gentiles who were followers of Jesus had to be circumcised, just like the gentiles who accepted the Jewish faith (who became proselytes) had to change their identities to the Judaic one (Bosch 1989, 7–8).

The first generation of Jews who joined the Jesus movement did not envisage that with this step they were breaking their bond with Jewish people and religion. Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians' “self-definition” saw themselves as the heirs of biblical promises, as well as the living incarnation of those promises. In contrast, (Bosch 1993, 8), the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians were of the view that the following of Jesus and salvation, which he announced, meant that the Law was no longer as important as the Jews—including Aramaic-speaking Jews—had maintained. The Holy Spirit rather than the Law will direct the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians into all truth. That has compromised their favour, and Stephen mentioned that in the Bible Acts 6 and Acts 7 suggest that they were martyred. From here, in addition to Paul and Barnabas, many more emerged apart from the first 12 apostles of Jesus Christ. Later Jesus sent the 72 apostles, including St Mark. It was not a coincidence that the disciples were called Christians for the first time (Acts 11:29). I am reading this as the “turning point” between the Jews and gentiles, a position that the Apostle Paul has clarified by stating:

We had to speak the word of God to you first [referring to the Jews]. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you a light to the gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 13:46–7)

Since Mark interacted with Paul and Barnabas, his apostolic involvement, particularly as Peter's translator, is valid. More so, it is noteworthy that he appeared before Paul as the “associate” of the 12 apostles. It was Papias who alluded in favour of Mark's Gospel. In one

of his extracts, which remains his work, he tells us substantively about the authority of the presbyter, and that Mark was the companion and secretary of Peter. He wrote down accurately what Peter narrated of the language and actions of Christ, carefully avoiding any alteration or misrepresentation, though not writing his memoir in (chronological) order.

St Mark according to Markos

In the preface of *The Story of the Copts* (Masri 1987), Markos describes John Mark as the African Apostle, martyr, evangelist and writer of the second gospel who came to Egypt in 42 AD (Mbiti 1986, 1). John Mark was born in Cyrene, whose ancient ruins are visible in the mountain cleft of Libya (Oden 2011, 17). He was born to a Jewish family of Cyrene. It occurred because of population displacements by the wars, which struck the Jews of Palestine so harshly that they searched for asylum. Markos said Cyrene was an international trading city, so it was not impossible to see people coming from all over the world of that time to come and trade there, some even looking for permanent residence like in the case of Mark's parents. Mark was the son of Aristopolus, and his mother was Mary. They were of the tribe of Levi, firmly adhered to Jewish customs. They returned to Jerusalem, if possible, several times a year for seasonal feasts. The boy's name (John Mark) signalled his multicultural family background. John is a Hebrew name and Mark a Latin name (Marcus, Marcos).

We also learn of Mark in Jerusalem, where his mother had access to a spacious place of residence (Acts 12:12), possibly with an upper room (as mentioned in African oral memory); the same upper room as noted in Mark 14:15 and Acts 1:13. In the early years, Mark and his mother joined the followers of Jesus. They became part of a culture-transforming movement within Judaism. Later, Mark would be the first among the disciples to write the Good News about the story of Jesus. Mark's story about Jesus became the oldest of all the surviving written efforts to describe non-Jews of the Good News in the beginning of Christianity. Mark's description became the pattern for all subsequent accounts of the account of Jesus (Oden 2011, 22). This young boy grew up in Africa and he was the principal carrier of the Good News of Jesus, Son of God, back to Africa. Many Christians in Africa loved and cherished him, thus enjoying his story being retold over centuries. In addition, this history has been researched from the same perspective in many centuries of its existence on the African continent.

Oden (2011, 45) further provides the traditional narrative in more specifics. Moreover, he classed it as the premium primordial narrative:

Two brothers were living in a city of Pentapolis in the West, called Cyrene. The name of the elder of them was Aristopolus [elsewhere Aristobulus], in the name of the otherwise Barnabas and they were cultivators of the soil and sowed and reaped for the head grade possessions. In addition, they understood the Law of Moses excellently...and knew by heart many of the books of the Old Testament. Nevertheless, great troubles came upon them from the two tribes of the Berbers and Ethiopians. They robbed them of all their wealth in the time of Augustus Caesar, Prince of the Romans. Therefore, because of the loss of their property, and the trials, which had befallen them, they fled from that province, in their anxiety to save their lives, and travelled to the land of the Jews. (Sawirus, HP, 135–136 in Oden 2011,45).

Sawirus had found the core of this narrative repeatedly in the early editions of the orthodox Synaxaries dating back to the pre-Nicene times in the *Martyrium Marci*. Its old base has been repeated in subsequent Synaxaries (classic, abridged, collection) of the *Lives of the Saints*, intended for trading in the context of public worship, and to nourish the personal prayer life of the faithful.¹

Mark was proficient in several languages and that gift and cultural experience shaped his calling to return to Africa. Jesus himself chose John Mark's mother to offer hospitality to the earliest disciples. Mark's life ended in the most populous city of Africa: Alexandria on the coast of the Nile Delta. Out of this city—the most influential intellectual centre of the Mediterranean world—emerged the first Christian school. It was a catechetical school designed to communicate the gospel to the world. Its unique learning process, from the apostolic text and in dialogue with culture, was born in Africa. Out of Mark's life and death came an enduring gift to all early Christians: the emergence of African Christianity.

Pope Shenouda III's Significance for this Discussion

I commend Markos for recording the event of his life experience to date. In addition, that includes the role played by Pope Shenouda III of the Coptic Church in Egypt. The Coptic Pope founded the OAIC in 1978 in Egypt. As indicated above, he was committed to ecumenism. The OAIC was set up to represent the voices of independent churches and to start some structures for theological education.

Markos confirmed that Pope Shenouda III is the 117th Patriarch of the See of St Mark and leading interpreter of the Coptic narrative of Mark. The Pope confirmed that the martyrdom of Mark indeed took place in Alexandria. Pope Shenouda III was one of the founders of the WCC in 1948. The pope came to support the AICs after realising that they lacked the required organisational structure to unite. Christianity in Africa never advanced sufficiently since the time of the Apostles, he said:

Bishop Markos is of the opinion that the phenomenon of the African Independent Churches should not only be looked at as if it is only experienced in Africa alone. The experience is very international. For instance, it spread throughout the world, in Latin America and Asia as well. Christian nationals to be independent of colonialism established many of these churches. People withdrew from Sunday services and started to meet around homes, open fields, the shade of trees, seashores and prayer cottages. Their prayer, hymns, music, and uniforms suited their environment and their taste as well. These meetings attracted thousands of inhabitants who loved and enjoyed them more than the services held by the Westerners who imposed their music and language. Another factor, which helped the spread of these churches, was the ease with which the Holy Bible was acquired in their mother tongue and at a low price. The ground is still fertile and the atmosphere is suitable for the appearance of new religious independent movements fixed in the African memories, according to Pope Shenouda III and Bishop Markos. (Interview on 23 March 2015 in Johannesburg)

1 "Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, Mount Athos." 1998. Orthodox Christian Information Centre, n.d. http://orthodoxinfo.com/general/synaxarion_intro.aspx (accessed 25 May 2017).

African Memories

The African oral memory contains the following characteristics when looking into the history from within an exceptional experience and from the outlook of the African continent:

Memory refers to a two thousand year long history. In the case of the African identity of Mark, his birth, life and death in Africa are well known, and the story remains retold in every part of the African continent. We recall the story in a similar way as its root sources. This whole story has been told in the main indigenous languages of Africa for nearly two thousand years, and six centuries before Islam. (Oden 2011, 27–8)

Pope Shenouda III, Markos, and Oden agree that much divides Christians among Africans, but the memory of Mark unites them. The Protestants' suspicions and stereotypes that Coptic liturgy is out of date or worse, is a long-standing phony which has caused conflicts since the fifth century between Catholic and Copts. Coptic pride hesitates to concede any measure of apostolic power to either Protestants or Catholics. Despite these differences, all of them are in basic agreement that Mark was the first Apostle in Africa. This fact makes Mark:

...the foundation of the Coptic patriarchal history that is honoured and celebrated in explicit annual Catholic and ecumenical liturgical recollections of Mark as the first Christian martyr of Africa. Mark is proudly and joyously the earliest apostolic ancestor to varieties of African Protestants, despite their diversity. He is the delight of both African Pentecostals and Orthodox in celebrating the outpouring of the Spirit at the house of Mary the mother of Mark as the setting of the original Pentecost in Jerusalem. (Oden 2011, 29)

Those who are looking for an ecumenical beginning point for bringing together diverse Christian viewpoints of African Christianity will turn to Mark. His life and mission embodied the unity of the body of Christ. Mark remains a fixed point of reference for virtually all Christian believers in Africa today. However, from the African perspective, there are also differences, as elaborated on in the following paragraphs.

Differences between African and Western Perceptions of Mark

The rest of the world seldom listens to the idea that Mark was born in Cyrene and died in Alexandria. In spite of that, African memory is shaping up and taken into account. Ordinary African Christians hold Mark to their hearts as one of their very own, as the first witness to Christian faith in Africa. Western scholars treat Mark as one who frequently appears throughout the New Testament, but is likely a Palestinian in origin and almost never regarded as African.

The problem is that African memory of Mark is very different from Western memory. The African narrative is often pigeonholed as unsupported by reliable textual evidence and thought to be naive since it is accompanied by miracles, dreams and visions. We should read the African story from the ancient saints' perspective. It must happen through the eyes of those who conveyed it, not through modern eyes alone. That would entail a different genre than that of many modern historical inquiries (Oden 2011, 23). The reading of this genre of literature requires "second naiveté" in the sense that the reader has been disillusioned by modernity from

the first stage of naiveté, where belief was the source of immense energy. Apart from being obscured by empirical criticism, it is recovered.

The birthplace and martyrdom of Mark the Apostle will always provide a remarkable difference between the European and African perceptions on data and interpretation of documents. It creates a sense of the maturing mind of an African theological scholar, moving away from Western modes of analysis as the finality of every interpretation of realities (Oden 2011, 24). Having said that, what about the story of those who claim a direct link to the earlier story of Mark, like Pope Shenouda III of the Coptic Church? Indeed, the one who is opposing the African memory of Mark by the Copts is facing an enormous task of convincingly resisting this story and annul the claim of the See of Mark in Africa today.

Markos and his Significance for this Discussion

Bishop Antonius Markos is the Coptic Bishop for African Affairs. He signalled the importance of the Coptic “church cross” that was mounted on top of the All Africa Council of Churches (AACC) building in Nairobi Kenya in 1984. The cross signalled to the world that the Coptic Church is the Mother Church of the African continent. In the foreword of a book by Masri (1987, foreword), *The Story of the Copts*, Markos explains John Mark as the African apostle, martyr and evangelist, writer of the second gospel who came to Egypt in 42 AD. Markos became the African continent’s missionary and coordinator of the Organisation of African Independent Churches (OAIC) at its inception. The OAIC is meant to represent the voices of “independent churches” on the continent. The Pope viewed the OAIC as the foundational structure together with others to form their theological education in the African continent.

The strategy of Markos (1996, 145) in doing mission is like that of the early adherents of Jesus Christ. He indicated that after the 12 disciples, Jesus Christ sent the 72 apostles of which St Mark was one (refer also to Ephesians 4:11). In his approach to missions and evangelism in the African continent, particularly among the AICs, Markos had to travel and attend meetings in many countries to know the leadership of the AICs throughout the continent—especially in the central and the southern African region. In his invitation to the AICs’ leaders to have their first encounter in the mainland, he realised that they wanted to be recognised as the first Apostolic African Church. When the Bishop asked them where they would want to have a meeting, they preferred “Naturally in Egypt, because they want to know Christ and see the places where the Holy Family arrived and stayed” (Markos 1996, 145). Also of interest to them was the story of Egypt in the Old Testament concerning ancestors. They desired to know where Abraham, Jacob and Joseph stayed when they were in that location. They too wanted to learn more about the birth and youth of Moses, and the other prophets who came to Egypt, such as Jeremiah.

How African Sources Shaped Early Christian Dogma

The African Exegetes powerfully affected theoretical formulation of the orthodoxy of the East and the West. Dogmatic definitions were working off textual interpretations hammered out chiefly in Africa, the Maghreb, and the Nile Valley. According to Byang Kato (1985, 42), the

definitions of Christology and the Trinity in Africa remained thoroughly shaped by concepts defined decades earlier in Africa by Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Augustine and Cyril.

The growing theological wisdom of Leo the Great, Cassio Dorus and Gregory the Great emerged later on the Mediterranean shores. Many generations after early Christian teachers had experience of Christianity. Western Christian dogma occurred in Africa long before accepted and ecumenically received worldwide. The diaspora Jews residing in the Nile Delta were a large community. The great Cappadocian Christianity writers, upon whom so much depended in the post-Constantinian Christianity, could not have done their work without scriptural knowledge of the Nile. They relied especially on Jews and Jewish Christian communities who had for generations been thoroughly indigenised in Africa.

Many Jews had lived in Africa for multiple generations, especially in the great international city of Alexandria, for two or three centuries before the coming of Christianity. This is evident from the extraordinarily influential translations into Greek of the Old Testament and the Septuagint. At its apex, the brilliant Jewish intellectual tradition of Africa produced Philo (Philo of Alexandria) with his approach to biblical events and metaphors. The Jewish community became a seedbed of preparation for the gospel that would echo throughout world Christianity. Major battles regarding hearsay remained fought in Africa before being ecumenically recognised. Gnosticism, Arianism, Montanism, Marchioness, Manichaeism were all thoroughly deliberated as problems of biblical interpretation in Africa before these arguments reached clear definitions in Rome as well as the Rhine and Orontes valleys. What the Irenaeus and Hippolytus of Rome learned about Gnosticism remained largely learned from African sources (Valentinus, Basilides, and Sethians).

The precocious intellectual developments in the African river valley of the Medjerda and the Nile informed the Medjerda successively. In addition, from the Nile region, Asian and European Christian orthodoxy was subsequently reported. It is a major miscalculation of many historians of dogma (in the tradition of Hegel, Harnack, and Bauer) to have eschewed this insight. It is not difficult to see that from Athanasius came the central defence of classical Christianity against Arian readings of Gnosticism and against Arian interpretations of the Gospel of John. What is hard to see is that this controversy is thoroughly African in character, language and spirit. The astute reasoning set forth by Athanasius had apparently long been recited quietly in the apostolic memory and tradition, but articulated by the leading bishop of Africa in opposition to another influential Libyan claimant, Arius. Athanasius, though, contested intensely to refine the Nicene formulae; nevertheless, it found its way into the centre of ecumenical orthodoxy. Even when actively resisted at first by the imperial authorities of Constantinople, Athanasius's scriptural interpretation in time became normative after the First Council of Constantinople (381) and the creed of the 150 fathers; the rest is ecumenical history.

Hildebrandt (1996, 5) maintains that if we can say that the Church of Jesus Christ began its ministry of evangelism and development on the day of Pentecost in AD 30, then it was shortly thereafter that the gospel came to Africa. In the Bible itself, the book of Acts 11:20 speaks about the people of Cyrene as being quite active in the leadership of the church in Antioch.

Later in Acts 18:24–28, Apollos of Alexandria became a Christian while on a visit to Ephesus. He became a missionary to Europe by preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people of Corinth. Traditionally, evangelist John Mark established the church in Egypt. Since God blessed him, before long he had planted five churches in Egypt and Libya. Hildebrandt (1996, 5) further indicates that Mark was dragged out of the great Church Baucalia in Alexandria, and martyred in 68 AD. Oden (2011, 12) says because of the martyrdom of Mark, the Christians around the world benefited from African Christianity from its inception.

The root of African Christianity lies in Mark, whose story is waiting to be told to those who have not heard it. This story illuminates Africa's venerated intellectual traditions. It introduces us to brilliant texts from ancient times. Moreover, it encourages freedom from the syndrome of diminished self-esteem in Africa that followed on the heels of colonialism. We do not have to confine our argument to the Western missionary period in Africa. African Christianity is much older than that, and this is justified by the existence and the story of the Copts in the African continent

The benefit of the OAIC and the AICs in the Story of Mark

Pope Shenouda III, the 117th Pope and successor of St Mark, is connected to the Copts' line of Christianity from its earliest time to the present. The Coptic Orthodox Church was established in the first century of our Lord. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, built in 330 AD, is a recognised member of the AICs for its apostolic report, and because it has never been under the leadership of any other church from Rome, Constantinople or elsewhere, that is why some of the AICs look at the Coptic Orthodox Church for adoption.

Pope Shenouda III decided to form the OAIC (he contacted nine countries attending a meeting in Cairo Egypt). Using the Copts' resources to support fellow African churches, he established the OAIC. Initially the organisation moved to address the welfare of the AICs on the African continent (Markos 1996, 152). A few lessons, which Pope Shenouda III had in mind to assist the AICs' theology, include the following:

a) Crossing the cultural boundaries

That means to learn the language of the people to win their hearts. Our Lord Jesus also warned us to wait for the power from above, before going for evangelism. Otherwise, all other efforts without the Holy Spirit will be a "lifeless body"; "spiritless corpse"; "as sounding brass"; or a "clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1). The power exercised on the day of Pentecost equipped them with courage, endurance, boldness, the readiness to sacrifice more and to work very hard. Also not to refrain from working to enhance "their ego," as the Lord washed the feet of the disciples and asked them to clean each other, to be equipped and convinced of the importance of the mission (Markos 2003, 83–5).

b) Defining culture

Culture is a learned behaviour socially acquired. It consists of the real and non-material traits passed on from one generation to another. Culture is accumulative and transmittable by society, but not genetically. There is no culture without society, while there may be societies without culture. Culture is a way of thinking, acting and reacting, but it is not visible; only its manifestations are visible. These manifestations are mostly things made or used by people (objects) or people's sayings and doings (actions). A culture develops from the abstraction of objects and actions into an identifiable and distinctive pattern of behaviour. Mbiti (in Cassidy and Verlinden 1986, 274) concludes that the gospel and culture interact in faith to produce many forms of Christianity in the world. The culture sustains, explains, articulates, communicates and celebrates faith. African Christians should not have to abandon their culture for Christ (Kraft in Cassidy and Verlinden 1986, 291). There is a need to balance cultural practices with the biblical teachings, especially that Christianity is a religion of the book.

A successful evangelist knows how to be in harmony with the culture of a new society. He should not accept aspects of a culture that conflict with the Word of God, the tradition or statutory laws of the church. Similarly, he should never say "no" to any culture that is not in conflict with the weight of the Bible (Markos 2003, 84).

The Role of the Mother Church in the Service of the Mission

Africans have acquired a profound faith from visiting Egypt's biblical sites, desert monasteries, churches, towns, and cities with rich historical sites. Glimpsing the age and genuineness of the church is possible. Even so, to make this accessible is not easy, as a good deal of money and abilities are needed (Markos 2003, 99). The importance of the AICs' priests spending a long time in Egypt has helped to embrace the experience of the Mother Church; by regular prayers, supplications, meditations, and thinking about how they can empower their respective denominations through this new experience. Who could take care of that? The Lord, who listens and answers in so many ways that do not occur to the mind of man; He can do this through His great and unexpected means.

Uplifting the AIC Leaders' and Servants' Standards in the African Continent

Markos thought of scholarship in Egypt to provide a multidimensional approach strategy, including spiritual, psychological, ecclesiastical, moral knowledge and doctrine. The education programme was structured to incorporate learning from examples of the Coptic priests' service. To help determine the level of fasting, prayer and regular confession as they live the Holy Bible, they would visit the Coptic monasteries in the Egyptian desert, being introduced to the life of contemplation and meditation. They would visit the famous historical places of the holy family in Egypt. They would attend the weekly Bible study of Pope Shenouda III, in which thousands participate. They would also travel to vocational training projects that were assisting the jobless to attain self-reliance and productivity; witnessing the ordination of the bishops in

St Mark's Cathedral in Anba Ruweiss, which is widely regarded as the headquarters of the church in the entire world.

Conclusion

The ancient African Christianity narrative is a wake-up call for an alternative to the establishment of a new approach in African Christian practices. As a result, the AICs need a strong African ancient Christianity to anchor them. What is required to execute this, is more willingness. Pope Demetrius was one of those with a little learning. When elected, he sought assiduously after learning to save his people. He used to say: "Lead men to seek knowledge with true humility, an ardent desire to learn, forgetful of rank or position" (Masri 1987, 21–22). He later became one of the most learned of prelates, a bright and shining star in the Coptic Church. Then Dean Origin would say to his students: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (Masri 1987, 35).

The Coptic Church in her modern time of revival, since the last century, has taken much care to prepare servers at all levels, including Sunday school for children, youth services, servers for rural areas, education for young women, social services and vocational training. It seems that the term "seven preparations" was coined during the time of revival; as the concept did not exist before then. AICs may learn from these experiences.

Early in the last century, AICs' priesthood came through a succession from parents without any preparation or discipline. However, learning from the Copts and their ancient African Christianity, will help these churches to improve tremendously. This is already taking place since some AICs are now learning from the Copts.

This article does not in any way suggest that AICs do not have an own theology, but it contends that if they felt the AICs were not strong enough to match the contemporary challenges to sustain the Church of Jesus Christ, they might need a revision from within. Cultural practices are their weakness, since this aspect controls their theology and has stolen much of the AICs' Christian theological flavour. Some African scholars and global ones suggest that if you withdraw the local cultures from the central mission debate, you are compromising its impact in the new environment. As a result, roundtable talks between the African theologians, the Copts and the AICs on issues of "African Ancient Christian Orthodoxy" may be necessary to keep Christianity more relevant and appealing to them.

The educational experience of the Coptic Church can assist the AICs in reading and interpreting the Bible for themselves. The fact that the Coptic Church is orthodox does provide a new experience, namely that of tapping ideas directly from ancient Christian practices that can empower the AICs' spiritual ambitions. If I had not met Markos, I could have not been informed about African Christian religion and its usefulness for the AICs. Meeting with Markos in Johannesburg has enlightened me about the need for a theology that is ancient African and informed by the realities of today; and I now know that this is possible.

Initially, Pope Shenouda III established the OAIC to work for the welfare of the AICs on the African continent; to bring AICs together in fellowship to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ beyond their contexts. As a result, the OAIC had to bring AICs together in communion. They had to equip and enable them to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

There are many shrines in Egypt, and they are necessary to explain the African Christian dialogue with African tradition and religions. For example, the Yorubas believe they descended from Egypt; Ethiopians also have close connections with Egypt (Puntland, Somalia East, and so forth.), and are interrelated. Africans have ways to handle many of their common practices. We must engage African culture meaningfully in dealing with concepts such as polygamy, Christian marriage, child upbringing, death and afterlife, advice on prayer, magic, sorcery, miracles and deceptions, among others.

Markos said that seeing is believing, suggesting the importance of visiting the holy places in Egypt. It is equally important for the Africans (non-Egyptians) to visit the Mother Church in Egypt. AICs need to be convinced in reading and teaching the Bible to empower themselves. Lastly, we appeal for more research on AICs' theology and African Christianity to create new approaches in seeking a meaningful understanding of the Christian faith.

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