

Africanising the Catholic Mass Celebration in Ghana: Recognising Cultural Identity or Agenda to Retain the Faithful?

Kofi Poku Quan-Baffour

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7290-8590>

University of South Africa

quanbeninyena1@gmail.com

Abstract

The Catholic Church started in Ghana in the 1500s. The missionaries of this Eurocentric Church prohibited its converts from practising their culture, for example the singing of folksongs, drumming, dancing and wearing of talismans in and outside the church, because they were deemed satanic, savage, fetish, heathen and ungodly. The missionaries' perception was that Ghanaians did not know God and they—the missionaries—had come to Africa to “teach the Ghanaians” about God. Church premises were decorated with the cross and Christ images to facilitate full conversion of converts; whereas Ghanaian traditional, cultural and religious shrines for the veneration of “their” gods were destroyed. Church hymns were in Latin and English with few translations. However, in a noteworthy change of heart, over the past two decades Ghanaian drums, songs and dance were once again accepted into the Mass. This ethnographic study, which was undertaken to understand the sudden “U-turn” on Ghanaian culture, found that the change of attitude was to recognise African culture with the agenda of retaining the faithful in the wake of competition from emerging charismatic churches.

Keywords: Catholic Mass; Africanising; heathen; transformation; enculturation; faithful; converts

Introduction

Christianity in Africa can be seen as the by-product of colonialism because the “cross followed the trade.” Wherever a colony was established, the missionaries followed to evangelise and win souls for Christ. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian church in Ghana today. This does not come as a surprise because it is one of the pioneer churches that started in the then Gold Coast during the era of colonisation. The arrival of the European colonisers in the 1500s paved the way for Christian missionaries to open churches in Ghana. The Portuguese Catholic missionary effort in Elimina in 1503 yielded few converts to the church (McWilliam

UNISA  university of south africa PRESS

Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae

<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>

Volume 44 | Number 2 | 2018 | #2822 | 10 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/2822>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online)

© The Author(s)



Published by the Church History Society of Southern Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

and Kwamena-Poh 1975, 34). Sporadic efforts by the Portuguese Catholic missionaries had gained 200 converts by 1637, when the Protestant Dutch captured the castle in Edina and chased away the Portuguese. However, the efforts by the Catholic missionaries in the then Gold Coast did not die out, for example the Roman Catholic Church Society of the “White Fathers” was formed in 1865 and from their base in Wagadugu (in Bourkina Faso) opened up missions in the northern parts of Ghana (Odamtten 1976, 104). The colonial administrators of the Gold Coast supported the missionaries to open schools, provided that English was taught in such schools. In their hidden agenda, both the missionaries and the colonial administrators needed interpreters to spread the gospel and to entrench colonial rule. The introduction of Western education was, therefore, not to assist the local people to raise their standard of living as such, but rather to train and use the Africans to achieve their own (missionary) goals, such as catechists for evangelisation on the part of the “White Fathers” and clerks to serve as interpreters for the colonial administrators.

The missionaries introduced the Catholic faith to the Africans but excluded the cultural practices of the converts (such as drumming, singing, dancing of folk songs and traditional dresses) from the celebration of the Mass. The singing of traditional or folk songs, dance and drums were regarded by the missionaries as satanic, heathen, savage, unchristian and ungodly. The Catholic Church introduced its Eurocentric hymns (mainly in Latin) and sermons in its worship (i.e. the celebration of the Mass) and effectively denied the African converts a space for their culture in worshipping God, *Onyame*.

Culture is simply the way of life of a group of people. It portrays the identity of every group of people through folkways, language, dressing and ceremonies. Any true worship of God cannot be complete without integrating the culture of the believers into it because worship is best demonstrated through culture. The way and manner in which the early Catholic missionaries propagated the gospel was like exporting seedlings to a completely different geographical region without taking into consideration the climatic conditions of the area. It was perhaps this lack of recognition for the Ghanaian culture which hindered the conversion of Ghanaians into what was regarded as the “white man’s religion” during the early days of the church in Ghana. The “White Fathers” had an uneasy and shaky start for their missionary activities because of the deep suspicion of the local people and even the colonial authorities (Odamtten 1976, 115). To win the locals over to the “white man’s religion” the missionaries built schools and clinics in all the missions to cure diseases such as measles, small pox, leprosy and tape worms. Since the latter part of the last century, the Catholic Church in Ghana has gradually introduced drumming, xylophone (*marimbas*), folk songs and African dance into the celebration of the Mass. The inclusion of some African cultural practices into the worship procedures of a very conservative faith raises questions whether this is the harbinger of transformation in the church or an indication of how Africa is stretching its cultural and psychological boundaries in Christianity. The quest to understand the motive behind the church’s surprise “U-turn” on Ghanaian culture informed this ethnographic study.

Perception of the Missionaries that Ghanaians did not Know God

The perception among the early missionaries was that Ghanaians did not know God and that they (the missionaries) had come to Ghana to teach the locals about God, *Onyame*. This wrong perception made the missionaries gear all the Catholic Church activities towards winning souls for Christ and to secure salvation for the “savage” and “heathen” converts. To realise the church’s agenda the missionaries decorated all church premises with the images of Jesus, the cross and the Saints to assist in the total immersion of the converts into the Catholic faith. To prove that the local people did not know or worship God, the “White Fathers” (as the missionaries were called by the locals) outlawed the wearing of talismans, the veneration of small gods and the beating of drums. The missionaries removed and threw away Ghanaian bracelets and talismans, destroyed the shrines and drums of the few converts because they were regarded as fetish. The wearing of African artefacts, bracelets and talismans by Ghanaians was outlawed and replaced by the rosary and the cross because such traces of African identities were considered satanic. The negative attitude of the “White Fathers” created resentment, animosity and suspicion among the locals, particularly the few converts for the Western missionaries.

The missionaries realised that African religion, art, music and other social activities were very closely connected with each other. Therefore, they wrongly concluded that they could not replace existing beliefs by the Christian faith unless they banished the other activities as well. Based on the words of Saint Paul: “What has a believer in common with an unbeliever?” the Catholic missionaries established Christian communities isolated from the so-called “pagan” influences” (McWilliam and Kwamena-Poh 1975, 34).

The truth is that Ghanaians knew and worshipped God, the “Supreme Being,” long before their encounter with the European missionaries. The wrong perception that Ghanaians did not know God made the work of the early missionaries very difficult to catholicise or convert Ghanaians to what was seen as the “white man’s religion.” The disrespect shown by the missionaries to religion, worship and culture of the local people made many of them resist the imposition of Christianity on Ghanaians. Both the missionaries and the colonial administrators had a wrong perception about Africans in general and religion in particular. Indeed, colonialism (and its concomitant Christianity) functioned, inter alia, to overshadow much of Africa’s indigenous knowledge systems and practices so that colonialism is recognised to be not only a political imposition but also cultural one (Wiredu 2005, 1). African religion, music, dance, drums and cultural practices were regarded as the “bulwarks of Satan” and banished from all school activities. The colonial administration was in many ways in cahoots with the missionaries because the former opened schools to educate the locals for lower grade civil servants in its administration of the colony. In spite of the seemingly good working relationship with the missionaries, an extract from the colonial government policy on missionary education warned the “White Fathers” to ensure that every care is taken to avoid the denationalisation of the native and the creation of a half-baked European.

To think Ghanaians did not know God and that they (the missionaries) had come from a foreign land to make them know God, was a non-starter for the early Catholic missionaries because religions began where humankind began (Biko 2001, 18) and religion is an exclusively human characteristic, although the “how” of worship might differ. The notion of the sacred among Ghanaians has always been demonstrated through works of art, symbols, languages, proverbs, drumming, singing, festivals, rituals and the explanation of a personal and collective experience of the universe (cosmology) or world around them. Traditionally, the Ghanaian lays much store by his religious beliefs and practices. Religion permeates all aspects of the life of the Ghanaian, from cradle to grave, be it hunting, farming, festival, marriage or mourning (Sarpong 1974, 130). The recognition of and reverence to God, *Onyame*, is part of the life of every Ghanaian. The belief in God, the “Supreme Being” is basic to every Ghanaian. Therefore, in talking to the Ghanaian about a creator who is all powerful, all merciful, provident, the Christian is not saying anything new (Sarpong 1974, 132). Throughout his journey in life the Ghanaian relies on religion to avert various hazards. It is the view of the average Ghanaian that a religion which does not help one out of an existential difficulty is of no use. If two different types of religion or two different deities are of assistance, it would be foolish to reject either of them. Indeed, the Ghanaian does not see any contradiction in putting himself under the tutelage of two or more spiritual overlords at one and the same time (Sarpong 1974).

Ghanaians in general believe in life hereafter and regard their kings as the living representatives of the departed. As part of the cultural respect, Ghanaians do not speak directly to a chief or a king. They do so through a linguist or an intermediary, which is similar to some Catholic Church practices of praying to God through the Saints as intermediaries. As part of Ghanaian culture drums are beaten to welcome or announce the arrival of a chief or a king to an important occasion, which is similar to the ringing of bells during the serving of the Mass where the priest blesses the Holy Eucharist. Ghanaians worship God, the “Supreme Being,” through smaller gods, rivers, mountains, ancestors and their kings; because God is unseen these symbols represent Him in the eyes of Ghanaians. Due to a lack of understanding of the local people the missionaries regarded the veneration of ancestors and gods as animism and wrongly concluded that Ghanaians did not know God and therefore worshipped objects—plants, trees, rivers and stones. Thus the religious thought of Ghanaians was wrongly identified as animism or “ancestor workshop.”

Ghanaians pour libation to the gods and the ancestors who are regarded as their intermediaries because they are spirits and therefore nearer to God, the “Supreme Being.” During African worship the people beat drums, dance and sing praises to God (*Onyame*) the creator (*OboadeE*). The Ghanaian wise saying, “*obi nkyere akwadaa Nyame*” (literally translated, no one points God to a child), is a living testimony of the knowledge of God among Ghanaians. God is innate or inborn and the individual is born with that idea, the existence of God. The missionaries did not take time to study and understand the local culture and how they could integrate it into the Christian religion. Out of ignorance and prejudice the missionaries concluded that Ghanaians were animists, heathens, or pagans. In their prejudiced minds the missionaries concluded that the Ghanaian was a “savage” incapable of conceptualising God, and therefore does not venerate his ancestors as a ritual of respect and affirmation of spiritual connectedness, but worships

them as ultimate reality of existence (Biko 2001, 20). The nomenclature devised to describe African religious thought was adulatory, superstition, animism, ancestor worship and fetishism. Ghanaians, and for that matter Africans, have always been religious and the concept of God or the veneration of God has been part of Ghanaians since time immemorial. The arrival of the missionaries and its concomitant introduction of Christianity is not what made Ghanaians to know about God. Christianity was another form of religion through which people worshipped God. The lamps are different—the light is the same. That is, there could be many ways of worshipping the same God, of which Christianity is one.

Conceptual Framework

As a study that focuses on culture and religion this paper was underpinned by the cultural fusion theory, whose major advocates include Croucher and Kramer (2016, 1). The concept “cultural fusion” is described as “how newcomers acculturate into the dominant culture and maintain aspects of their minority culture while at the same time the dominant or host culture also fuses aspects of the newcomer’s culture into the dominant culture to create a fused intercultural identity” (Croucher and Kramer 2016). Cultural fusion involves adaptation and adoption of culture of the host country or community. Cultural adaptation is “the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar or changed cultural environments, establish or re-establish and maintain a relatively stable reciprocal and functional relationship with those environments” (Kim 2001, 31). This process involves enculturation, deculturation and acculturation of newcomers to a culture where the ultimate lifelong goal is assimilation into new culture. Cultural personhood is a complete emerging of oneself into a dominant culture (Kim 2012). It has been affirmed that the newcomers to a dominant culture continually build upon their knowledge base and integrate their previous cultural knowledge with newly acquired culture. The newcomer, to a very large extent, is reliant on the host environment and thereby assimilates cultural practices of the environment (Kraidy 2005). Cultural fusion and adaptation are processes by which an individual adapts to a new culture. Cultural fusion thus takes place within the host environment.

The theory is based on the following assumptions propounded by Croucher and Kramer (2016, 35).

- Humans have an innate self-organising drive and capacity to adapt to environmental changes. Once an individual arrives in a new environment s/he learns how to live there by adapting his/her life to the culture of the environment.
- Humans have an innate self-governing drive to maintain their cultural identities. There are newcomers to communities or countries who choose to maintain their original cultural identities because they might not like to lose them. There are also individuals who maintain their identities and still adapt to a new environment through communication. That is, interaction with the members of the dominant culture.
- Cultural fusion involves both acculturation and cultural maintenance. Humans are socialised into their native cultures and so when individuals encounter a new culture they become torn between adapting or maintaining their own.

- Cultural fusion of the individual with the new environment occurs in and through communication. The co-adoption of the dominant culture reveals the dynamic nature of cultural fusion.
- The key component of cultural fusion theory is that the process of an individual fusing into a new culture transforms the individual. Thus cultural fusion brings about intercultural transformation, i.e. positive changes can occur for both sides. As newcomers usually identify more with the host culture, their socialised identity transforms.

The cultural fusion theory has major implications for this study because cultural adaptation is and should be the dominant concern of all people who migrate to other places outside their home region or country. Most often this is seen in learning to speak the local language, wearing of local clothes and participating in social activities of the local community, for example attending festivals, funerals, marriage or naming ceremonies.

Christianity in general and the Catholic Church in particular, as it was introduced to Ghana, had its basis in European culture. It was a Eurocentric religion and the Catholic Church did not make any effort to adopt it to African culture because the early missionaries did not consider cultural fusion as the bedrock of evangelisation. This initially made the local people suspicious of the missionaries and therefore they resisted the imposition of what was regarded as the “white man’s religion” on them. For this reason even those who were converted to Christianity practised their culture outside the adopted Western religion, something the missionaries resented. To date, even though there are minimal changes to the conservative stance of the church, the local converts practise their culture side by side with the teachings of the church. For example, the Ghanaian Catholics do two funeral celebrations for a deceased member of the church. There is usually the first funeral conducted by the church, where the priest serves the Mass and buries the dead, and after a week or two the family and the community provide the same deceased member of the community with a cultural funeral which may last for two to three days. This practice of a dual funeral has been going on in Ghana for a very long time.

Based on the above discussion one can argue that without efforts to integrate the local cultural practices into the church activities, it would be naive of the European Catholic missionaries to think that the Ghanaian Catholics were truly and 100 per cent converted to the Catholic faith, since they still practised their culture through the naming, marriage, funeral ceremonies and festivals. It is for this reason that the early Catholic missionaries did not find it so easy in achieving their evangelisation goal. They ought to have incorporated the African culture into the church right from the onset to make it more African. It has been argued that if there are some things Europeans continued to be triumphant about in Africa, it would not be because they are European or operated by Europeans, but because they have been shared with Africans and adopted by Africans as their own (Oliver 1961, 102). Ghanaians can be adaptive so long as their culture is respected; hence certain foreign cultural practices have been given a distinctive Ghanaian character, such as high-life and brass band music and songs. The conservative Catholic Church did not seize that opportunity until in the late 20th century when many spiritual churches started mushrooming in Ghana. Perhaps that was a wake-up call for

the church, which reluctantly and slowly started to adopt or incorporate Ghanaian culture into certain aspects of the Mass celebration such as drumming, singing of African folksongs and playing of xylophone during the Mass celebration.

Research Methodology

The qualitative research in the form of ethnographic investigation which directed this article was employed to establish the surprise acceptance of some of the Ghanaian cultural practices into the Catholic Mass. The study was deemed ethnographic because it is an investigation that focused on a group of people in a community and an organisation, i.e. a church. It has been noted in literature that the primary task of ethnographic research is to uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action and manage their situations as well as the problems and difficulties they encounter (Welman, Kruger and Mitchell 2006, 193). Ethnographic study allows the researcher to observe a particular situation or practice and interview particular people to uncover and explicate information. This research design was therefore deemed most suitable for a study which investigated the activities of a church and the experiences of its members. Three large and old dioceses of the church namely, Sunyani, Techiman and Offinso were deliberately selected for the study. In each of the dioceses three parishes were randomly selected to participate in the study. The total number of participants selected from the three parishes was 18, with the following breakdown; three priests and 15 members of the parish. The 15 participants comprised male, female, adult and youth church members who attend the Mass at the selected parishes.

Data Collection

In collecting data for the study the researcher, who is a Catholic by birth, attended the Mass in each of the three selected parishes. He observed the church proceedings, interviewed the priests and three church members made up of men, women and youth. The participant observation was done side by side with informal interviews (i.e. what the author referred to as useful conversations). The informal and unstructured interviews focused on the following:

- How long have you been attending this church?
- What changes have you observed in the church service for the past two decades?
- What are your views on such changes?
- What do you think are the objectives of these changes?

Findings and Discussion

To make data easy to analyse the researcher pruned and arranged them under four main themes.

Theme 1: Number of years of attending the Mass in the particular parish

The participants were asked how long (in years) they had been attending the Mass at their respective parishes. The responses revealed that of the three parish priests two had been at the current parishes for between six and eight years and one was in his third year at the current

parish. The 15 parish members had been attending the Mass at their respective parishes for between 20 and 40 years. One elderly woman confirmed this when she said (verbatim):

I was baptised in this parish when I was a baby and I attended my primary and middle school here in the mission school. I always attend church here since my youth.

Another participant, a young woman in her twenties, added:

My father was a catechist in this parish and Mom a choir member. This parish has always been my spiritual home.

The responses provided by the participants indicate that they know, understand and participate in the activities of their parishes because they have been attending the Mass for a long time at their respective parishes. Attending the Mass for a long time at the particular parishes also indicates that the participants have institutional memory or knowledge of the church and are in a better position to recount their experiences and provide comment on the developments in those parishes.

Theme 2: Changes observed in the church service for the past two decades

Through the informal interview conversations the researcher asked the participants to mention any changes they had observed or seen in the church service (the Mass) over the last two decades. It is interesting to note that all participants corroborated in their responses that they had seen tremendous changes in the proceedings of the Mass. Regarding some of the specific changes they had witnessed in the church service or the Mass, 80 per cent (N=13) of the participants agreed in their answers that they had seen transformation in the church in general and specifically in the Mass, where some Ghanaian cultural practices have been incorporated into the church service. The participants mentioned that songs in Ghanaian languages, playing of the flute, beating of drums and dancing take place side by side with Western church hymns during the Mass. This, the participants agreed, was unthinkable some 30 years ago. The other 20 per cent (N=3) of the participants added that the use of Latin to conduct the Mass had been replaced by Ghanaian languages in the parishes. In most of the parishes it was learnt that where three church services are offered, one of them is in English (the official language of Ghana) to accommodate visitors and other Ghanaian language speakers from different parts of the country. The responses above are clear indications of the effort the Catholic Church in Ghana is making to decolonise the church. The transformation agenda is the Ghanaian Catholic way of pushing the frontiers by Africanising the church.

Theme 3: Participants' views on the motivation for the changes in the Mass

As a sequel to the changes participants have observed taking place in the order of the Mass or the church service, questions were asked about the views of the participants on such changes. All the participants (100%) agreed in their responses that the changes had been introduced into the Mass procedures to recognise Ghanaian cultural identity. Both the priests and the church members reported that the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference has acknowledged the need for members of the church to worship God through their own cultural lens and not entirely via foreign culture—as it used to be the case some decades ago.

A participant, who was a young church leader and one of the priests, summed up the views of the participants as follows:

The songs, drums and dance are used to praise God in the African way. They make members active participants of the proceedings of the Mass, instead of long sermons punctuated with foreign hymns in Latin and English

Two church elders, a man and a woman, also added:

It is a Ghanaian culture to announce the arrival or the presence of a paramount chief to a durbar through ululating and drums for everyone to stand up and show respect to the chief. Thus, instead of ringing bells during the blessing of the Eucharist, we beat talking drums to announce the presence of the Saviour Christ, the King and to welcome him.

The above responses are an indication that Ghanaians as Africans have come to realise that they can truly worship God as Christians through their own culture. As one participant intimated (reproduced verbatim):

If Christ was born in Ghana he would have used Ghanaian culture to propagate the gospel. We need to Africanise our church not only to make it lively and keep its members but also to worship God through our way of life.

The foregoing responses and views of the participants are indications of how the Catholic Church has come to realise the importance of integrating Ghanaian culture into the Catholic Mass and the general activities of the church. As Africa pushes its frontiers, it should not be only on political and economic fronts but also regarding social, religious and cultural values.

Conclusion

The study found that the introduction of local songs, drums, dance and the wearing of traditional dresses and artefacts into the Catholic Mass is being done to recognise African culture in order to retain the faithful in the midst of competition from the emerging charismatic churches. The study concludes that cultural fusion is taking place in the Catholic Church to make its members active and happy in the church so that they remain in it, because God is only one and all people can be true followers of Christ without necessarily abandoning their cultural practices or identity.

References

- Biko, F. 2001. "African Foundations of World Religions: Religion; Africa's Gift to the World." *New African*, April Issue (395): 18–21.
- Croucher, S. M., and E. Kramer. 2016. "Cultural Fusion Theory: An Alternative to Acculturation." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 1–18.
- Kraidy, M. W. 2005. *Hybridity: Or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Kim, Y. Y. 2001. *Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-cultural adaptation*. Thousand Oaks, CA; SAGE.
- Kim, Y. Y. 2012. Beyond Categories: Communication, Adaptation, and Transformation. In *Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication*, edited by J. Jackson. New York. Routledge, 229-243.
- McWilliam, H. O. A., and M. A. Kwamena-Poh. 1975. *The Development of Education in Ghana*. London: Longman.
- Odamtten, S.K. 1976. "The Beginnings of the Educational Enterprise of the White Fathers in the Northern and Upper Regions of Ghana." *The Oguaa Educator* 7 (1):104 -116.
- Oliver, R. 1961. *The Dawn of African History*, second edition, edited by R. Oliver. London: Oxford University Press.
- Sarpong, P. 1974. *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*. Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation.
- Welman, C., F. Kruger and B. Mitchell. 2006. *Research Methodology*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Wiredu, K. 2005. "Towards Decolonizing African Religion and Philosophy." *African Studies Quarterly*. <http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/4/3.htm> (accessed 18 November 2016).