

TANGAZA COLLEGE

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PASTORAL DEPARTMENT

***Penance and Reconciliation:
Liturgical Celebration from an African
Perspective***

**An Essay Submitted to the Department of Pastoral Studies in
Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of a
Bachelor of Arts Degree in Religious Studies**

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STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material used herein has not been submitted for academic credit to any other institution. All sources are cited in full.

Signed *Edmund C.S.*
16th February, 1998.

Approved by: _____
Moderator

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

If I remember my Church history well, the sacrament of reconciliation is one of the sacraments of the Church with a very challenging history. At one stage in Church history this sacrament was the most ecclesial one, which used to be practised in front of the great assembly. Then, it has ended up becoming one of the most privatised practices. I once went for confession and we happened to be very many in the line waiting. It took me more than an hour before I got my chance. When my turn to confess came, I got shocked when the priest cut me short and gave me penance and absolution. Though some time later I came to understand the situation of the priest, it was a surprising experience for me. The priest had heard a lot of confessions that morning already and he still had so many people waiting in the line. He, therefore, had to rush in order to finish with all of his penitents. The point is, I never got satisfied with how the priest handled me in confession, a practice which I held very dear. What I want to bring home is that the confession practice today has become very much similar to a doctor prescribing drugs for a sickness before proper and adequate diagnosis, thus without really knowing the root causes of the sickness. If I were to benefit fully from that confession of mine, the priest should have listened to me, given me some advice and then absolution. It might become a common tendency today in the confessional, for priests to prescribe a penance and give absolution without adequately helping the penitent.

Thus it is commonly said that the practice of confession is dying away; and even where there are penitents, the practice leaves a lot to be desired. Thus a crisis in the Church's celebration of penance and reconciliation is clearly noticeable. An indication for this allegation might be the decrease of the number of people attending this Church form of Reconciliation. I have no comparative figures to show whether this is true or not, but my experience in my parish shows that this is true, especially among the youth.

In any society where people live together there are some norms which regulate the relationship between them and when these norms are violated the relationships are affected. In this context sin is the violation of good relationships. Sin and reconciliation have their key note in the relationship within a given community of people. It is true for both African traditional society and the Church that, if sin affects the entire relationships toward the common good, the celebration of Reconciliation should also involve the whole community affected by sin.

Unfortunately, in the past, the sacrament of Penance was portrayed in the Catholic Church as a totally individual affair where sin was over-stressed in its relationship to God, forgetting its effects on people's relationships with one another. Thus the practice lost its connection with daily life. Sometimes the way Reconciliation is celebrated in the Church makes very little or no sense at all to the penitent.

The title of this essay came as a result of my long reflection on how to revitalise the celebration of Reconciliation in the Church and how to

obtain in it true peace and the reconciling experience that the sinner expects. I am interested in how the Church understood and expressed the sense of sin and reconciliation and consequently what might be the setbacks in finding fulfilment in the canonical form that we have today. Many will say this situation is due to the Church's rigidity, but this is being ignorant of the post-Vatican II teaching on Inculturation and adaptation. In articles 38 and 39 of the "Ordo Paenitentiae" (1973) we see how the Church, while admitting and confirming a proper system for the sinners' reconciliation, also sees the need for each society to develop its own text which would more clearly express the mystery of forgiveness and Reconciliation in terms of the character and language of that society. Yet very little has been done to effect this call. This call comes from the need for the revitalisation of the celebration of reconciliation, so as to make it an action which is truly ecclesial; one in which the community is involved and in which individuals find Reconciliation with God in terms of their adherence to the Christian community.

"Penance and Reconciliation: Liturgical celebration from an African perspective" therefore, aims at providing a theological reflection on some African values which can be applied in the Reconciliation ceremony in the Church, especially from the point of view of the usage of signs and symbols. The community aspect, which is a characteristic of all African celebrations, has a special emphasis here, particularly in the ecclesial dimension of the Liturgical celebration of Penance and Reconciliation.

It is very important, then, to understand the African concept of sin and forgiveness so that we can speak fairly about reconciliation in Africa. However, special reference is made to the people of my own tribe and this comes from a more experiential knowledge. I hope, therefore, my experience will provide most of the material for this essay, though I will also rely very much on library research.

I hope this reflection will provide some light on how to inculturate the liturgical celebration of Reconciliation not only among the Wachagga of Kilimanjaro but also in any African society. The suggestions that I will give in this essay come from my own reflections. It is my hope that they may be beneficial also to others in similar situations. If someone finds them useful and implements them, my endeavour will have been abundantly rewarded.

CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL NOTION OF SIN AND RECONCILIATION

1. Clarification of terms related to the topic

a. *The Notion of Sin*

What comes into mind when we hear of sin is “broken relationship”, but what type of relationship? The Old Testament looks at this from the point of view of the covenant relationship between God and his people. It uses different words to describe what we call sin. The Hebrew words “*hattah*” and “*pesha*” literally mean “*failure to reach the goal*” or “*to miss the mark*” and this could mean not necessarily moral judgement, but a non-action or omission. Other words like iniquity, guilt, rebellion, disorder, abomination, lie,... are also used in the Old Testament to mean the same thing. Hence sin was not simply the transgression of the law, but actually caused a break in relationship between God and his people. Israel understood very well her relationship with God and this was perceived as a “Covenant Relationship” of love, initiated by God himself. The purposeful action of rebellion against this covenant constituted what we refer to, here, as sin and guilt. “Guilt was understood as a burden too heavy to bear, a rust that eats into a person’s soul and remaining engraved on the sinner’s heart”¹. This is the notion of sin in the Old Testament: a break in the relationship between God and human beings.

¹ Peter E. Fink (ed.), The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1990, p. 1191.

This covenant of love was to establish a personal union and mutual relationship of God with his people.

On the other hand, the New Testament uses the Greek term "*harmatia*" for sin. It adds the interior meaning of sin as a deliberate effort to violate the relationships. Sin is not merely an individual act, but also a power at work in the world which was finally overcome by Christ. For Paul, "sin is universal, something in which everyone is involved. It is first and foremost a state of human nature from which sinful acts come"². It is our obligation to resist and overcome sin by accepting Jesus and his Spirit working in us (cf. Rom 8:6).

The two major kinds of sins are: original sin and actual or personal sin. Original sin, as portrayed in chapter three of Genesis, refers to the first sin of Adam and Eve, the effect of which is the perpetual tendency to personal sin. My concern here is not about original sin, but about actual or personal sin committed with full responsibility by the sinner. Whether personal sin is venial or deadly³ this is not an issue here, because by both kinds of sin the relationship between an individual and his creator is damaged. The sins that bring guilt and consequently spiritual death are in this category of actual or personal sins. They cause spiritual death because they are committed with full knowledge and freedom. For Jesus, those who commit such sins are the lost sheep whom he came to find

² Ibid., p. 1192.

³ The distinction between mortal and venial sins is derived from 1Jn 5:16-17 to show the varying intensity/seriousness of sins.

(Luke 19:9-10; 15:1-10). They are the dead to whom he offers life and merriment (Luke 15:22-24; 31-32). Sin is, from this point of view, the canker of the heart and from the corrupt heart come all sorts of evil deeds (Mk 7:21-23). The sinful attitude is built up by individual actions. This amounts to the origin of the notion of sinfulness: a state of mind and will, a way of life that leads to total rejection of God because of one's selfish pride (Jn. 15:23). Sin takes away God's grace, leaving the sinner isolated from God's people. Guilt is a disease that demands a radical cure and a complete change of one's attitude.

b. Confession of Sins

"Confession" was a popular name for the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. Yet it is only a part in a sequence of acts which constitute the total cycle of complete and effective repentance and conversion. An individual confession of sins to a priest is a specific statement of the penitent's sins to a confessor. This is an obligation for all baptised people with the use of reason, as stated in Canon 988 of the new Code of Canon Law. It is an opportunity within the total rite of penance to dialogue with the confessor about the root causes of sins in one's life. In this way the penitent opens up to the minister, seeking forgiveness of sins from the Church. A genuine confession becomes a healing moment for the penitent. It is the penitent's expression of conversion by which one

returns to God who calls him/her in Christ.⁴

What the penitents tell the confessor cannot be a fully adequate expression of their sinfulness, rather it is only a sign of what they want to tell God, a sincere expression of their sinful situation before God. The sign value of this confession of sins marks the extent to which the sinners have been aware of their sinfulness and their inner desire for God's forgiveness. It has a theological meaning: it marks a growth toward religious authenticity, through which the penitent recovers with greater integrity the meaning of confession as a salvific and joyful encounter with Christ in the Church. The new rite of penance for the whole Church, which was approved by Pope Paul VI in 1973, emphasises the love aspect of confession. This emphasis is placed on love and peace rather than on guilt and fear. Forgiveness or reconciliation is presented to the penitent as a gift from God through the Church. Thus whenever the members of Christ's faithful sin, they should not hesitate to approach Jesus Christ who is full of mercy and compassion and to seek forgiveness through an authentic confession of serious sins.

⁴ Cf. Michael J. Taylor, The Mystery of Sin and Forgiveness, St. Paul Publications: Bombay, 1975, p. 156.

c. *Penance and reconciliation*

The twentieth century saw a more profound development in the theology and practise of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation than ever before. Some elements have changed, but some have remained as consistent parts of the penitential rite throughout history: contrition, confession, conversion of the heart and ecclesial forgiveness. The historical and cultural context of a particular era might have led the Church to place the emphasis on one aspect of the penitential process over against the other. In the early Church, for example, penance was centred on penitential works as a sign of conversion; tariff penance emphasised confession and works of charity; the and medieval practice stressed confession and absolution⁵. In some of the recent Church documents on penance and reconciliation the emphasis is put on the need for a continual conversion which is manifested in Christian daily life. Individualistic pre-occupations have prevented many from realising the full scope of conversion as a dimension of the Church's mission. The deepest meaning of penance and reconciliation is conversion which goes beyond ritual observances to the whole of Christian life as a mission. Conversion of the heart is therefore, a condition for, and an effect of, penance and reconciliation (Acts 26:18). It means turning away from a life of sin to a life of grace, moral goodness and personal integrity. From the very first Christian sermon (Acts 2:38), the Church has ceaselessly

⁵ Cf. Robert Kennedy (ed.) Reconciliation: A Continuing Agenda, The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, 1987, p. 84.

called people from sin to conversion and manifested the victory of Christ over sin in the celebration of penance.

In the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II “Reconciliation and Penance” (1984), conversion from sin is used as a synonymous of penance and reconciliation. In this apostolic exhortation penance means a conversion that passes from the heart to everyday deeds and then to the whole Christian life. It marks both religious practice and a sacrament of the Church. This is the practice which may arise from the desire to undo the damage of one’s own sinfulness. Understood in this way, penance becomes an act of Christian worship and a profound turning back to God, who alone has the power to overcome sin.

Sometimes, penance is understood in a negative way as an act of denying oneself something one likes most, as a “payment” for one’s sins. It is also seen as a “punishment” imposed on the penitent, as a retribution for one’s sins. But the sacrament of penance should be seen as a step in an on-going conversion journey, because it sets in motion the surrender of one’s sinfulness so as to be reconciled with oneself, with God and with the entire believing community. Penance is also a continual effort to overcome what is evil and sinful in us for the sake of forgiveness and communion in the Church. Hence it should no longer be seen as negative, but as a joyful experience of encounter with Christ who heals and saves. This experience is transformed into praise and thanksgiving.

2. Dimensions of sin: Personal and Communal

Without necessarily denying the fact that the ultimate root of sin and evil in the world lies in the actions of individuals, there is a need to see the relationship between the individual and his community in all aspects of sin. The awareness of sin depends very much on the awareness of relationships, hence every sin has two inseparable dimensions, no matter how private or secret it might be. We talk of sin as an evil that one does freely before God and which renders him/her alienated from God, from him/herself and from others. So any sinful act is an offence against God, the effects of which reach out to all members of the Church. An assessment of the seriousness of sin is arrived at by paying very close attention to those relationships. Personal sin affects the whole area of primary relationships between people, whereas social sin is at the more complex, impersonal and structural level of secondary relationships. Social sin is the objectification of sin in the economic, social, political and ideological fields. It becomes typical in any organised system in the form of hunger, utter poverty, conflicts and injustices of all kinds. Social sciences have shown that such are the results of socio-economic and political relationships, the root of which is selfishness and arrogance in the exercise of power. Though we cannot attribute these sins to the conscience of individuals, still as Christians we will contribute to their presence in many ways: through our words, attitudes and even silence. Therefore, a communal celebration of reconciliation, for that matter, is

quite appropriate, since it expresses better the sense of community guilt because of sin.

Human persons can adequately be understood as individuals only in the context of the community and so the full and true nature of sin can only be presented when the personal-communal nature of sin is well perceived. It is impossible to speak of the profound instincts and experience of people or the roots of evil, while isolating the individual from the community because most people come to a realisation of sin through its effects on themselves and on others. The sense of alienation which arises as a consequence of even the most private sin is one of these powerful effects of sin. The experience of isolation from one's true self and from others may lead a person to reflect on one's behaviour and move towards conversion. Also the effects of this social alienation must be countered before the individual can have the ability and confidence to face oneself as a person with individual responsibilities.

3. Popular understanding of sin and reconciliation.

Following the same line of thought, it is my impression that there is a great decrease of the "*sense of sin*" among Catholics today, because the number of people who go for sacramental penance and confession seems to be very low and at the same time most of them could be classified as "elderly people". Does this mean young people no longer sin or is it that they have no sense of sin at all? Is it sin that has changed or the understanding of sin? To say that young people no longer sin and

therefore, they do not need forgiveness and reconciliation in the Church is false because we see so many factors which show that sin is still a reality in the world. Things like national and international conflicts, violence, social, political and economic corruption, as well as many other forms of violations of human rights and justice are part of our daily experiences, at least through the media. We notice a lot of immoralities, thefts, killings, brutality and all kinds of discriminations, all of which, “when seen from a theological perspective are rooted in sin”⁶. Hence we can in no way claim that forgiveness and reconciliation are not important. What might have changed is our understanding of sin which is basically rooted in our changing understanding of ourselves as persons and believers. The fact still remains: “sin is a transgression of the law of God; a disobedience of the Divine will; a moral failure..., failure to realise in one’s conduct and character the moral ideal under the existing circumstances and a failure to do as one ought towards one’s fellow human being”⁷.

In this age of technology and consumerism, human sciences are striving to overcome anything that would lead to feelings of guilt, by affirming more and more human freedom. This need to overcome feelings of guilt has led to a wrong solution: the denial of sin or at least the glossing over of culpability by an appeal to emotional and psychological forces beyond our control. There has also been a tendency to reduce sin to what offends people and overlook one’s relationship with God. In his

⁶ Robert Kennedy (ed.), Reconciliation..., p. 63.

⁷ Karl Menninger, Whatever Became of Sin?, New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1973, pp. 18-19.

apostolic exhortation “Reconciliation and Penance” of 1984, Pope John Paul II speaks of the decline of the “sense of sin” in our world. He connects the sense of sin with the “sense of God” and so when the latter declines, the former does too. He attributes such a situation to some factors like secularism, advancement in human sciences, relativization of moral values and the affirmation of human freedom. The spirit of secularism stands as the essence of the decline of the sense of sin. However, “if sin is the breaking of the one’s filial relationship with God in order to situate one’s life outside of obedience to him, then to sin is not merely denying God, but also to live as if God did not exist, to alienate him from one’s daily life”⁸

A tremendous educational effort is required to present the people with a more profound and proper notion of sin and its effects on the individual, on society and on our relationship with God. This can be done through “a clear reminder of the unchangeable principles of reason and faith which the moral teaching of the Church has always upheld”⁹. The sense of sin, which should be restored, is that which reaches the critical areas of living and can enable Christians to make personal moral judgements about their own behaviour and see it clearly in the context of their life with God in the community. There is also a need for a clear focus

⁸ John Paul II, (1984) Reconciliation and Penance, n.18.

⁹ Catholic Bishops of America, Rite of Penance, New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975, n.18.

on the salvific work of the Holy Spirit as the power of penance and reconciliation.

4. Reconciliation: A Sacramental Celebration

The primary sacrament of reconciliation is Baptism for the forgiveness of sins, while the Eucharist is the celebration of the reconciliation already won by Christ as the pledge of the final unity. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, in the proclamation of the word of God, in prayers and in the penitential aspect of the Eucharistic celebration, we obtain reconciliation with God and with one another.

However, the specific sacrament of reconciliation for the baptised sinner is penance¹⁰. Just as in the other sacraments Christ makes himself present and operative through the Church ministers, “the Church exercises the ministry of the sacrament of penance through bishops and priests ... They declare and grant forgiveness of sins”¹¹. In this sacrament the penitents open themselves up to the Lord who forgives by means of sacramental absolution which, in the doctrine of the Church, is described as a judicial act.

In the relationship of dialogue which the sacrament of penance actuates, the part carried out by penitents is of supreme importance. When, with proper disposition, they approach the saving remedy and

¹⁰ The Canon Law Society (English translation), The New Code of Canon Law, Bangalore: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1983, Can. 988.1.

¹¹ Austin Flannery (ed.), “Vatican Council II”, Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, (7.12.1965), Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1992, n. 26.

confess their sins, they share by their actions in the sacrament itself. The sacrament is completed when the words of absolution are spoken by the minister. In the new Order of Penance (1973) personal absolution and general absolution with or without prior individual confession are presented. "Individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the sole ordinary means by which a Christian faithful who is conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God, and with the Church; physical or moral impossibility alone excuses from such confession"¹². Here there is a pronouncement by the individual penitent with the whole depth of one's conscience and with the whole of one's sense of guilt and trust in God. This is the sinner's personal encounter with the saving Christ through the minister of the sacrament (Mk.2:5). General absolution is only given as an alternative way of sacramental absolution when the individual absolution is not possible¹³.

¹² The Canon Law Society Trust, The Code of Canon Law, (English translation), Bangalore: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1983, Can. 960.

¹³ Ibid., Can. 961.

CHAPTER TWO

SIN AND RECONCILIATION FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

What I have shown in the previous chapter attempts to summarise the normative way of understanding and expressing the concepts of sin and reconciliation in the Church. This will be the background against which the African concepts of sin and reconciliation will be understood.

1. Sin in African traditional Society

“In African traditional society, morality is seen to be in an intimate relationship with the ontological order of the Universe”.¹⁴ This order, which is said to be God-given, is expressed in many structures that are found in the society. Any attempt to violate this order is a contradiction regarding life itself and it brings about a physical disorder which reveals the fault. We can therefore refer to God as the “law-giver” in a sense that even morality becomes a code of positive law. Hence sin is the transgression of this law. For the Africans, sin is something concrete and existential: it manifests itself in various ways in the society. Distinctions can be made between a simple ordinary fault and sin. As Fr. Shorter puts it, “sins offend and invite punishment from God and spiritual beings whereas (simple) faults bring about physical disorder by themselves.”¹⁵ Simple faults are the acts that violate the laws of life without constituting

¹⁴ Aylward Shorter, African Culture and the Christian Church, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1973, p.62

¹⁵ Aylward Shorter, African Culture and the Christian Church,..., p.62.

either ethically good or bad acts. Such faults result from things like breaking of minor taboos or disrespect of magical powers. Faults become sinful when they harm others and involve the ill-will of one person towards the other. At this point, the anti-social nature of the act is so great that, in one way or another, it involves the spirits who are actually supposed to be the guardians of the social order. In most cases, sin is referred to by the name of the disaster brought about by it, for example, the sin of barrenness, death, sickness or other misfortunes. Hence, for an African, sin is something concrete and it is only through concrete solutions that it can be got rid of. The African knowledge of sin as a concrete and existential reality has its foundation in the African people's awareness of God who is creator and sustainer of all, who is the giver of life and in the fact that life is the basic value for them. From God, life reaches all individuals through the ancestors, the traditional rulers, the heads of the clans and finally through the heads of the families. This order is considered to be sacred and any attempt to disturb it is sinful. The African world-view sees sin as the break of the social order resulting into the breakdown of communication between the living and the ancestors. The solution is to re-establish the contact with the ancestors through a sacrifice in which the dead are called once again to eat and drink with the living, to forgive them and be reconciled with them.

Moral values are believed to be directly or indirectly given by God to safeguard the social order. Those who disturb this divinely instituted social order are alienated from their community until proper

reconciliation rituals are fulfilled. Being sanctioned by one's own community is one of the most shameful experiences which causes tremendous feelings of guilt. There exist complex inter-personal relationships among Africans, between them and their living-dead, and between them and their God. The dynamism of sin is therefore seen within this world view: sin affects the entire system of relationships.

As per their knowledge of what is morally good and bad, Africans know for sure that evil deeds bring social calamity, because they annoy both God and the ancestors: an action is morally evil if it brings harm to the society. These are the actions which violate the areas of life connected explicitly with the needs of the community, like protection of life and property, respect for traditional authority and the good relationships to be maintained with the ancestors. In many African traditional societies stealing, murdering or brutality to domestic animals were considered criminal and sinful. Other evils included suicide, parents neglecting their children or vice versa and inhospitable behaviour. Some of these moral evils, including murder, incest, suicide, misuse and disrespect for sacred places and objects, were regarded as "*Abomination*"¹⁶

Note that moral values preserved in traditional customs, rules, laws and family taboos aimed at maintaining the social cohesion and harmony. Hence breaking them was an offence against the will of God, the effects of which would be the outbreak of natural and social

¹⁶ Abomination marks the total rejection of God and the community. This act brings disaster and shame both to the offender and to the entire society.

calamities like drought, floods, earthquakes, war, land, animal and human infertility, etc. It was society morals which had produced the virtues that society appreciated and endeavoured to preserve, e.g. friendship, compassion, love, honesty, justice, courage, hospitality towards the stranger and the weak, etc. Such values kept the society from disintegrating and gave a sense of inner peace to those who kept them. Some other things that were said to be evil and sinful were: robbery, rape, breaking of taboos, sorcery, laziness,¹⁷ etc. These acts caused much shame to the individual and society and they demanded a serious ritual purification.

From the above, one can identify three groups of sin in African societies:

1. Light offences due to human weakness. Such sins are not very serious.
2. Serious offences against the law, like breaking the taboos of the tribe.
3. Abominable offences: these are grave moral or physical evils more detrimental to the society. They are followed by severe punishment.

The seriousness of an offence depended very much on the following:

1. The social position of the offended and the offender
2. The effect of the offence on the victim (whether individual or the society).
3. The nature of the damage done and the type of relationship severed by the offence

¹⁷ John Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion, London: Heinemann, 1975, p.178.

4. The intention of the offender. Sometimes one might offend the other without being aware or with the good intention to help the other. Such a case was not considered a big offence.

All in all, any offence, regardless of the group in which it falls, requires a proper reconciliation ritual to restore the harmony broken.

2. Dimensions of Sin

If we do not pay close attention to the composite structure of the African traditional society, we can be tempted to say that there is no such a thing like personal sin or guilt among the Africans. In actual fact, it is the individual person who brings up social guilt. However, in many African traditional societies, the gravity of sin is determined according to the anti-social nature of an action. The act that violates the established social order affects necessarily the ancestors and God. Sin in traditional African society has social effects because through blood ties and common fate the individuals are so much a part of the society that their offences are not just private affairs, but the whole community is concerned. The whole society suffers the consequences of an individual offence. It disturbs the temporal and spiritual order and disrupts the harmony which should exist in the society. Hence, sin is both person-centred and community-oriented. Any moral offence is first and foremost a disruption of the social order and harmony, thereby causing a rupture of relationships with the spiritual beings as well. An offence is punished by

God and the ancestors because of the harm it causes to the members of the group.

A study on the Igbos of Nigeria shows that “sin as producing a wide spreading effect on people is an alienation from the community, a rejection of true kinship values and an irresponsibility which for the native is expressed in neglect of Relatives”¹⁸ Again, since the individual has a corporate personality, any offence committed by an individual has social impact. Though individuals are responsible for their faults and personally held accountable for them, there are some cases in some African societies where an individual can be held responsible for the faults of another family member. This happens most in societies where there is wife inheritance because, inheriting the wife, one inherits all from his brother, including faults.

Hence sin in African traditional society is experienced both at personal and communal level, though the communal aspect outweighs the personal one. This is precisely so because of a complex network of inter-personal relationships in the society, as well as social solidarity.

3. Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Precisely because of the complex notion of sin in the African context, a notion which is rooted in the community and the solidarity

¹⁸ C. Ogu, “Offence in Traditional African Societies: The Igbo Case,” *Lucerna*, 1981, no 1, p. 47.

among the Africans, reconciliation has to take this aspect seriously. The need for reconciliation arises from the people's awareness that offences committed by an individual severe relationships between that individual and the community. Depending on the gravity of the sin, the offenders could even be cast out of the social circle of their friends and relatives (ostracised) until their family members sincerely repented and pleaded for pardon. Reconciliation could be done through either ritual purification or ablution, with a prescribed formula and in special places. The reconciliation ceremony was performed by all parties involved in the offence. The nature of an offence determined the type and manner of reconciliation. Light offences, for instance, simply required the making of peace after breaking the relationships. The reconciliatory ritual for deadly offences or breaking the taboos used to be that of purification or cleansing. For major offences, like abomination concerning grave moral or physical evils, more elaborate rituals used to be performed.

Since in traditional African society there was no clear distinction between sin and other offences against civil law, the reconciliation process could as well apply to both the secular and the religious sphere. The complexity of such process comes from the fact that Africans never used to make distinction between religious and secular. The two realities were so intertwined that the entire life became a celebration in communion with the divinities. However, for reconciliation to be celebrated effectively:

1. Those concerned should initiate the talk over their problem without outside intervention. They should strive to forgive each other and reconcile.
2. An appeal should be made to an elderly person who would act as a mediation between the two parties in case the first effort failed.
3. Traditional rulers or heads of families should be involved, if there was disagreement.
4. In case of abominations, due to their deadly gravity, traditionally constituted and recognised institutions were to be involved. This consisted in a more complicated ritual for purification usually concluded by sacrifice and libation¹⁹.

Reconciliation ceremonies may be classified as follows:

1. Reconciliation between two individuals: usually a simple form for simple faults. The offender would approach the offended and apologise. The act was concluded by the exchange of a sign of peace, e.g. shaking of hands, and maybe sharing a meal or a drink together.
2. Reconciliation between an individual and the family or clan. This followed after a very serious offence because of the shame it caused to the family. Accumulation of such abominations could provoke the anger of the ancestors who would intervene and punish the family

¹⁹ Actually this orderly distinction which fits very well the reconciliation procedure in an African traditional society is derived from the Bafut of West Africa.

Cf. John B. Ambe, Meaningful celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in Africa, Eldoret: AMECEA, Gaba Publications, Spearhead, nn.123-124, 1992, pp.20ff.

with a series of catastrophes. The traditional priests used to be the chief ministers of such ceremonies.

3. Reconciliation of the tribe with God and its ancestors used to be celebrated whenever there was a disaster in the society. This was usually done at the family shrine in the form of a sacrificial offering or appeasing sacrifices. Sometimes oracles were consulted to determine the time and manner of the reconciliatory sacrifice.²⁰

4. Signs and Symbols used in Reconciliation Ceremonies

Reconciliation ceremonies were not only encounters with other people but also with the unseen reality. They expressed and made real some kind of unseen mystery. Therefore, healing the breach of the covenant necessarily involved an appeal to the unseen God and the spirits. The rejection of sin used to be externalised through symbolic actions. Signs and symbols, well chosen, were very effective in expressing the people's sorrowful experiences before the divinity and their acceptance of God's forgiveness. Reconciliation ceremonies in traditional African society amounted to the symbolism of the rites of purification when, for example, blood is poured, or when water is "*blown out*" of the mouth, or when a stick is broken and burnt or when the sin and its consequences are passed on to a sacrificial animal or object.²¹

²⁰ John Ambe, The Meaningful Celebration ..., p.20.

²¹ Cf. Aylward Shorter, African Culture and Christian Church, ... p. 63.

Due to the communitarian nature of reconciliation ceremonies and the nature of the mysteries the ceremonies accomplished, reconciliation rituals were dramatised through symbolic actions, thus making the celebrations more meaningful and comprehensible to the people who celebrated it. It was through ritual performances that the society acted out the tension they experienced because of sin, to bring about a tensed unity once more. Such symbolic performances were typically community-oriented, as opposed to magic performances which were merely individualistic rituals of power.

Among the signs and symbols used (some of which are still in use) were specific types of plants or tree branches, some particular domestic animals, drinks like beer, water or milk and some kinds of arbitrary symbols like toys. Whatever types of symbols were used, appropriate gestures and words accompanied them to make them more appealing and meaningful to the people. Such gestures could be an exchange of tree branches or leaves, slaughtering /killing of a sacrificial animal, sprinkling or pouring of blood, water, beer or milk. The ceremony started in a sorrowful atmosphere, but was concluded by a joyful celebration involving eating, drinking and dancing.

Like any other celebrations therefore, the reconciliation ceremonies in traditional African society involved the use of a variety of symbols and rites. They were the people's celebrations which, because of their symbolic expression, brought them, their God and their ancestors together in harmony with each other

CHAPTER THREE

SIN AND RECONCILIATION AMONG THE WACHAGGA OF KILIMANJARO

1. Historical Background of the Chagga people

The Chagga people (*Wachagga*) are found in the northern part of Tanzania, on the slopes of mount Kilimanjaro. It is estimated that between the 16th and 17th centuries, the now so-called Chaggaland was initially inhabited by the people known as “*Ndorobo*” who used to lead a simple life of hunting wild animals and gathering and fruits. These *Ndorobo* people had no political organisation strong enough to resist foreign invasion from their neighbouring counterparts. The land of the *Ndorobo* was very fertile with enough water and rains through the most part of the year. A lot of food crops used to grow there attracting people from the neighbourhood to come in for food and pasture.

Oral tradition has it that the *Wachagga* do not share a common ancestry and this accounts for the reason why it is a bit difficult to call them a single tribe in a strict sense. This argument also accounts for the reason why the *Wachagga* of different localities speak the same language, but in different dialects or accents. The traditions and customs among the *Wachagga* do not differ much though there are some slight differences. According to these differences I would categorize the *Wachagga* into three main groups:

1. Those of the northern Kilimanjaro (Rombo).

2. Those of the central Kilimanjaro (Vunjo).
3. Those of the southern Kilimanjaro (Hai).

These three groups correspond to their three different origins. Those of the first group trace their ancestry from the Taita and Kamba people of Kenya while those of the second group find their origin from the Pare and Usambara people of Tanzania. Similarly, those in the third group trace their beginnings from among the Kikuyu of Kenya and the Maasai of both Kenya and Tanzania.²²

It is believed that the neighbouring tribes (the Kamba, The Taita, the Pare, the Maasai and the Kikuyu) used to come to the slopes of the mountain for food during the years of famine. As these neighbouring tribes collected more foodstuffs than they could carry, they built some simple stores where they put the surplus for future times. These stores were called the "*chagga*" by the local people. So every time they came to collect their food they said that they were going to "*ushaggani*" (which meant the land of the stores). Some people decided to make their permanent settlement in the area. Hence the place acquired "*chaggaland*" as its name and its people acquired the name "*Wachagga*". These people settled down and organised themselves as a group leading a subsistence economy.

When Christianity was brought to Kilimanjaro in the 19th century, the *Wachagga* were not without religion and a strong belief in the one God. They knew God as the supreme being who is the author of life and

²² These historical facts are from the point of view of oral tradition.

sustainer of all that exists. He was also the one who gave the ancestors the laws of society. God used to be known as "*Ruwa*", a name which was also used for the sun. Using the image of the sun for God implied that God shone everywhere and no one could escape his power. God takes care of his people during the day and the night. The expression "*Ruwa Mangi*" (God the King) indicates the supreme power of God over everything. He rules over all creation.

This God was the one worshipped and adored by the Wachagga everyday. Sacrifices used to be offered to him through the ancestors and the family spirits who acted as the intermediaries between the living and God. "In many and various ways African people responded to their spiritual world of which they were sharply aware."²³ The Wachagga are not much different from the other Africans since they used to worship and communicate with the God they knew very well. Sacrifices and offerings were made to God in various occasions of life. Apart from the thanksgiving sacrifices which were offered to God, there were many sacrifices for special occasions only. Some of the most important occasions for sacrifices were:

1. During the time of crisis like wars, hunger, sicknesses, deaths, floods and other forms of misfortunes.
2. During the time of reconciliation and peace-making between individuals, groups and their God.

²³ John Mbiti, African Religion and Philosophy, ..., p.75.

Whenever an animal was slaughtered for sacrificial purposes the head of the animal was directed towards the mountain (Kilimanjaro) which was regarded as the “seat of God”. The first drop of the blood was let to drop on the ground as a sign of reverence towards God, because He is always the first to taste the animal. According to the *Wachagga* traditional religion, sacrifices used to be accompanied by prayers in which the names of the family ancestors were invoked with hope that such intermediaries would convey the prayers to the almighty God (*Ruwa*).

This was the situation the missionaries met when they first arrived in the second half of the 19th century. However, I do not deny the fact that religion and culture of the *Wachagga* were one and the same thing. Religion and culture were quite intertwined and together they formed the *Wachagga* way of life.

2. The Understanding of Sin and Reconciliation

When we deal with the concept of sin and reconciliation among the *Wachagga* of Kilimanjaro we find a slight difference between the *Wachagga* and the Christian understanding, however the implications are the same in both cases. It was very difficult for me to find a synonym for “sin” in the Chagga language. The closest term which refers to the notion of sin is “*Iwari*”. “*Iwari*” literally means something which should not be done at all, but at the same time it is used to describe what we know as sin or evil. The term itself is not very familiar among the *Wachagga* - it is rarely used. People easily speak of evil deeds some of which cause severe

effects on the individuals, their belongings and the society. For the *Wachagga*, sin is seen in terms of relationships in the community. People are supposed to live in harmony with each other especially by observing the traditional customs and the taboos. Hence breaking the traditional customs of the land implies breaking the relationship with the rest of the people in the clan: elders, ancestors, family spirits, and with God.

Sin (*Iwari*) means something that can and should be punished immediately even though the concept of personal sin and guilt is quite foreign to the *Wachagga*. Sin is acknowledged as such when it is discovered or its effects become known to the society. A man might sleep with another man's wife without feeling that he has committed a sin until the act becomes known to the other man. It is only then that the legal process is followed in order to bring about reconciliation between the two parties. Because of the complex interpersonal relationship in the society, then, a sin committed by one individual affects the whole family and society. Purification or Reconciliation should therefore be a community affair.

Some evil deeds are purely secular matters and these are resolved by legal procedure in the traditional courts.²⁴ All the same, such acts like theft, murder, cruelty to human beings and animals involved both legal

²⁴ The Chaggas had a very strong social and political organisation under a chief. The chief was both a sovereign and a judge, to whom the people looked for guidance in personal and public affairs, for security of land, for the lead in agricultural industry, for distribution of water and in some aspects he was their high priest. Hence, the ancestors were the only spirits to whom his subjects were subservient and to whom public sacrifices were offered.

cf. Charles Dundas, Kilimanjaro and its People, Great Britain: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968, p.278.

and religions rituals. Some of the evil deeds were very closely related to the world of the spirits, meaning that they could wound the relationship between the ancestral spirits and the living. Their consequences were enormous and severe. In a nutshell, the traditional offences can therefore be grouped as follows:

1. Against one another in the society
2. Against the traditional customs of the land.
3. Against the living-dead and the supreme being - the sacred.

Those considered as abominations fall under this category, like: mistreating or insulting a dead person, lack of respect for the grave-yards or the family shrine. These bad actions had a deep religious impact which could only be corrected through proper purification rituals.

Like in most African traditional societies, the existence of sin among the *Wachagga* manifested itself through various signs, like dreams and visions, and natural calamities (droughts, floods, deaths, infertility of the land, animals and human beings, or bitter pains during the action of giving birth, for the woman. The hooting of an owl near the home-stead was also another sign that the situation was not all right. All these signs required an action by the people involved, to try to interpret them and to do the required purification rituals. It was believed that when one started having visions of dead people at night or even during the day, one of the departed members of the family was not happy and therefore he or she had to be appeased through prayers and sacrifices.

3. Cases and manners of Reconciliation in the Traditional Chaga Society

There used to be as many moments of reconciliation ceremonies as there were cases of breaking the relationships. In some cases these were initiated by the individuals involved in the offence. It was, and still is believed that when the elders pronounced a curse on their children and then the children asked for pardon, the one who uttered the curse used to perform a proper ritual ceremony to change it into a blessing. Also if one failed to keep the solemn oaths one once made, one ought to perform similar ceremonies. The most common cases of reconciliation ceremonies used to take place when there was a breakdown in marriages and family relationships. When the couple disagreed and separated, after sometime one of them was to initiate the reconciliation talk and whoever was found guilty was fined heavily. This was very important because of the well-being of the children, especially the little ones. If the husband wished to have his wife back home he would take with him a little baby and, placing it in front of the wife, requested her to return home. With this gesture, the wife could hardly refuse to pardon him, otherwise she was punished by the whole clan. Some other signs of a similar nature and effect in asking for peace and pardon were "*Isale*"²⁵, banana beer, milk or other

²⁵ "*Isale*" (or in plural "*Masale*") is the sacred plant (shrub) among the Wachagga of Kilimanjaro. It belongs to the *dracaena* species and is used when one wants to ask for pardon, peace or reconciliation. Once your rival approaches you with the *masale* leaves you ought to grant what s/he is asking for or else great harm might befall you and your belongings. This plant is used to mark the family graveyard and for land demarcations.

Cf. Kathleen M. Stahl, History of the Chagga people of Kilimanjaro, London: Mouton & Co., 1964, pp.122, 123.

items like clothing and necklaces. Death of a close elderly relative would be an *ipso facto* reason for reconciliation in case of a broken family. Before the burial all family members should reconcile. The wife who was separated from her husband, for example, should return home or else she would be “excommunicated” by the rest of the family.

Some of the very clear signs that forgiveness or reconciliation was obtained were the acceptance of the items delivered at the beginning of the talk, the exchange of the sign of peace, the exchange of a banana beer calabash and the fact of drinking from it, and the acceptance to share the meal together. It is important to note that most reconciliation ceremonies took the form of celebrations characterised by eating, drinking and dancing. They were the moments of community celebrations.

Like in most African traditional societies, among the *Wachagga* too, sin or breaching of traditional customs is not merely a matter demanding punishment or redress. It imparted a bane to the individual or the whole society which remained until proper purification ritual was done. Emphasis was put on the mysterious force of evil which affected not only the evil doer, but also the one offended. Hence the offended one should also be purified, from the misfortunes which might befall on him or her. Under normal circumstances the purification rituals were administered by particular people in their respective clans. In south-eastern Kilimanjaro, for example, this task was entrusted to the “*Wako mariwa*”²⁶. These

²⁶ The “*Wako mariwa*” was a clan of traditional priests who were also diviners and medicine men. They were the ones who used to perform ritual purifications and sacrifices.

people were formally highly honoured and even received tribute from the chiefs and the people.

From his researches on Kilimanjaro, the land and its people, Charles Dundas came up with a case study on how the *Wachagga* used to obtain purification from sinfulness. The following will be a kind of summary of the purification rite with the signs and gestures necessary for the ceremony.

The one who was unclean due to some kind of offence was compelled to have recourse to the "*wako mariwa*" and provide the necessary ingredients for the rite. All these ingredients were regarded to have mild properties suitable for the appeasing of the ferocious nature of the offended spirits. The person would carry with him /her:

- the skin, dung and stomach content of a hyrax
- the skin and blood of a monkey.
- the shell and "blood" of a snail.
- herbs called "*maande*" and "*moro-ro*".
- the tail of a lizard ("*gnu*")
- the skin of a gazelle ("*mende*")
- the blood of a female sheep
- rain water taken from a hollow tree ("*mbogathi*") in the forest.
- fresh water drawn from a spring in the early morning
- two black sugar canes with their roots.
- and fresh banana beer.

The person performing the purification rite comes to the village or hut at the specified time of the day (usually at 10am or 2pm). He digs a shallow but broad hole in which he places two or three banana leaves, thus forming a kind of a bowl. He then takes a young banana stem and places it in a furrow, which he digs close to the hole, and he makes two gateways with the sugarcanes besides the furrow with the banana stem. Now the leaf-lined hole is filled with the water, blood and other ingredients, and the people are directed to pass through the gateways, the husband leading, and after him his wife followed by the offender's brothers and other relatives. As each one passes through the gateways and comes to the hole, the "priest" dips his "gnu" tail (the tail of a lizard) into the mixture and brushes the unclean person saying the following words while facing the mountain (Kibo):

***"(May) the evil and uncleanness become gentle
on these that you be not tormented again."*²⁷**

Next he sprinkles the liquid from the hole over their heads to imitate the rain. This performance is repeated four times : morning and evening in four successive days. Then they carry the liquid from the hole and the sugar-canes to a river. Casting them into the water, the "priest" says :

***"(May) the evil and sin and uncleanness which
come from us go with this river. (May) the
water of this river carry them to the plains"*²⁸**

²⁷ Charles Dundas, Kilimanjaro and its People, London: Frank Cass &Co.Ltd., 1968, p.157.

²⁸ Ibid.

This marks the end of the rite, after which people return home for a celebration. This becomes a joyful occasion celebrated by dances, eating and drinking. The "Priest" (*wako-mariwa*) is at the end rewarded with one goat and a half sheep (meat) as a sign of appreciation. "Kishogu" rings are made of sheep skin and are worn on the third finger of the right hand. Those purified and their family members also wear these rings for some time: between 3 and 7 days.

CHAPTER FOUR

TOWARD AN INCULTURATED LITURGICAL CELEBRATION OF RECONCILIATION

1. Challenges and Principles of Liturgical Inculturation

Since the last three decades, social and historical situations have been decisive factors in Christian theological reflection. Christian faith and practice is discussed in a context, by a critical method of self-awareness and social analysis. In general, the method used to achieve this aim is known as *inculturation*. As a pastoral practice, inculturation is very evident today in various aspects of our liturgies. However not much has been done to inculturate other areas of Christian life. Likewise the talk about liturgical inculturation has been extended also to the liturgical celebration of penance and reconciliation and much effort is necessary because ever since the “windows were opened” to improve our liturgical life, very little has been done especially as far as the celebration of reconciliation is concerned. Probably this poor implementation is due to lack of interest at all levels and ignorance of cultures, and how these cultures can be effectively utilized to colour our liturgical celebrations.

Many different terms have been tried in order to express the meaning of inculturation. “Adaptation” or “accommodation” have been used to express the same reality, but they were inadequate in that they could not express the sort of indissoluble marriage between Christianity and each local culture. Adaptation “implied a selection of certain rites and customs, purifying them and inserting them within Christian rituals

where there was any apparent similarity”²⁹. After this, the term “indigenization” came into use, with an effort to confer on Christian liturgies a cultural form that was native to the local community. “Incarnation” was applied in the documents of Vatican II as a paradigm for the young Churches³⁰. Incarnating the liturgy is to make the Christian liturgy really meaningful to the people who are celebrating it. Contextualizing the liturgy is what really matters in Christian worship in that the rite of worship becomes relevant when it reflects the people’s experiences and culture. The term “contextualization” distinctively echoes Vatican II’s call for relevance which is voiced in the Pastoral Constitution “Gaudium et spes”.

Father Aylward Shorter, the present Principal of Tangaza College, makes a very close link between two terms: acculturation and inculturation. “Acculturation” means the encounter between two cultures, where each culture learns from the other and influences the other. For him, and I find this very correct, “acculturation is a necessary condition of inculturation”³¹. However acculturation is just an inadequate expression for our purpose, since it might lead to mere juxtaposition of cultural values. “Inculturation” takes priority over the former because it refers to a deeper reality. Here inculturation is “the creative and dynamic

²⁹ J.M. Waliggo (ed.), Inculturation: its Meaning and Urgency, Kampala: St. Paul Publications, 1986, p.11.

³⁰ Austin Flannery, (ed.), “Vatican II”, Ad Gentes, Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, 7Dec. 1965, Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1992, nn.10, 22.

³¹ Aylward Shorter, Towards a Theology of Inculturation, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1980 pp. 6-8,12.

relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures”³². It implies bringing and expressing Christ and his message to the life of the people in the manner they understand better.

Inculturation has three traits: firstly, it is an on-going process relevant to all people where the faith is proclaimed; secondly, Christian faith can not exist except in a particular cultural form; and thirdly, between Christian faith and culture there should be interaction and reciprocal assimilation, resulting into the enrichment of each other.

The scope of liturgical inculturation extends to the totality of Christian faith and celebration. It also means that the liturgical rites and ceremonies should be adapted to local cultures, for example by means of local melodies, fine arts and similar visible or tangible elements that can better express Christian celebration in a more appropriate way. Liturgy, being the celebration of the people, has to reflect the people’s concrete life. Hence inculturation becomes a process by which the people of a particular culture are able to live, express, celebrate, formulate and communicate their Christian faith and their experience of the paschal mystery in ways that appeal to them more, thus conveying more life and truth in their social and cultural settings. This is a challenge to all Christians and to pastors, especially those in a position to assist in liturgical worship. There are four key principles that are to be observed in this task. These are:

³² Aylward Shorter, Towards a Theology of Inculturation, ... p.11

1. Any attempt to inculturation should remain faithful to our New Testament origins. This means that it should reflect the intention of Christ: this should be taken care of in any form of liturgy.
2. To see to it that the only unchangeable elements in Christian worship are the divinely instituted ones. These ones cannot be changed whatsoever.
3. To see to it that cultural elements which are to be used in Christian liturgies are not, in any way, connected with witchcraft.
4. To see to it that elements which are incorporated in liturgies are in harmony with liturgical celebrations and that they promote a more authentic Christian and African celebration.

2. Inculturating the sacrament of reconciliation

What I said above refers to all liturgical celebrations. The sacrament of reconciliation, as a means of imparting grace on the sinners, has also to be made relevant to those who celebrate it. There are many ways in which this noble sacrament of the Church can be celebrated and can bring more meaning and satisfaction to the people. This is only possible if we understand some of the traditional signs and symbols used on such occasions in the African societies.

How can we draw a link between the Christian understanding of sin and reconciliation and the African understanding? Basically the concept is the same, except that, from the African perspective, the community aspect is more elaborate. I have summarised the three

theological steps of reconciliation in the Church and in a traditional African society as follows:

In the Church

1. The sinner approaches God who is merciful and ready to pardon through the Church minister.
2. The sinner is reconciled with God and with the Church.
3. The sinner is once again re-admitted to participate in the Eucharist.

In African society

1. The sinner approaches God in the same way through the community.
2. The sinner is reconciled with God, the ancestors and the community.
3. Once again the sinner gets in communion with other family members through sharing of their meals and feasting.

From this summary it is clear that reconciliation in the Church could very well be inculturated by incorporating some of these African values I have just mentioned. I have said this because there is no much difference between the two celebrations. The present system of reconciliation in the Church does not meet the true sense of “metanoia” found among Africans. This might be the reason why sins of the same nature are so often repeatedly committed by the same person. Africans reconcile the sinners in public, and this does not mean to expose the sinner to offence or shame but a healing process. It is to inform the family that their member is weak in some areas and that the person should be helped to overcome them. On the contrary, the Church absolves the penitent secretly and this does not help the sinner to recover from one’s

sinfulness³³. Talking of the Oromo people of Ethiopia, Fr. Lambert Bartel (C.M) said that "to most of them sin has primarily a social dimension and should be confessed and redressed publicly."³⁴ In societies like the Oromo, where religious life pervades social life, reconciliation with one's fellow human beings implies reconciliation with God. This is better expressed in a number of rituals of peacemaking and purification, where God, too, is always asked for forgiveness. Hence private confession appears superfluous and even less meaningful.

As a challenge, then, reconciliation in Africa should also fall into the same process of inculturation like any other aspect of Christian practices and celebration. There are so many good ways and symbols in traditional African societies which could very well be adapted in the celebration of this sacrament, thus making it more enriching and appreciated. The question one should ask oneself is how does an African feel the sense of sin and how does he/she go about reconciliation in a traditional setting? And again how did the community use to look at the sinner and what did it do to reconcile him/her with the rest of the community members? What are the symbols used to ask for forgiveness and how can these elements be incorporated better in the celebration of Church reconciliation, so that an African sinner may truly feel the joy of being reconciled?

³³ Willy Mnyagatwa, "Inculturating the Reconciliation Experience" In: Liturgy: Towards Inculturation, Eldoret: Gaba Publications, Spearhead, n. 92, 1986, p.30.

³⁴ Lambert Bartels, "Reconciliation and Penance: A View from Ethiopia", In: AFER, 25(4), August 1987, p. 223.

3. Inculturation of the Sacrament of Reconciliation Among the *Wachagga*

Before I talk about inculturating the celebration of Reconciliation among the *Wachagga* of Kilimanjaro, we have to know the theological principles and meaning of the sacrament. This is the sacrament of the Church through which a sinner regains sanctifying grace. It is the Church's celebration of reconciliation and the celebration of the healing mission of Christ in the Church and this should not be taken for granted. So this theological principle has to be expressed in any attempt to contextualise this sacrament. Besides, it is possible for it to be celebrated in an African way while retaining its authenticity.

My observation is that the way this sacrament is approached and administered in the Church of Moshi today is almost the same as it was celebrated before Vatican II, yet the Council has given the local Churches a lot of possibilities for improvement and adaptation to local cultures. Sin and confession have become very cheap words. One sins and goes for private confession and absolution so that he/she is allowed to receive the Holy Communion again. Without much commitment, the same person commits the same type of sin and goes either to the same priest or to another one for confession. Truly, this has become a sort of routine and almost a kind of physical exercise. Whether or not the sinners really feel true guilt for their sins and therefore find fulfilment and relief in the sacrament, is a question I cannot answer now. The fact is, we need a

change. We need to change the way we understand sin and Reconciliation. We need new ways to express our feelings of guilt and our sincere need for reconciliation. This is only possible if we revisit the Chagga traditional ways dealing with offences and Reconciliation and incorporate some of these good values in the Church celebration of reconciliation, so that when a Chagga falls into sin and approaches the sacrament of reconciliation, he/she may get truly satisfied and fulfilled. That is to let the Chagga experience that there is love and forgiveness from the God of his/her ancestors and that he/she regains the peace and tranquility lost because of sin.

How can this be achieved? I would suggest the following:

1. First and foremost, catechesis on sin and its effects together with reconciliation should be given emphasis. The African sense of these realities could help people understand them better. Some of the things which used to be held as sinful in Chagga traditional society should be counter-checked with the ones referred to as sinful in the Church in order to draw a genuine and authentic meaning of sinfulness in both cultures.
2. Hence catechesis on sin and reconciliation should be geared toward traditional methods of reconciliation without forgetting the canonical form of absolution. This can very well be practised in an African way.

3. Public sin could be settled publicly in the presence of the pastor. This would facilitate public reconciliation. This form of general confession and absolution is highlighted in the new code of Canon law,³⁵ and in the Apostolic exhortation of Pope John Paul II on Reconciliation and Penance (1984, No. 33). The pastor should invite all the faithful present to pray for this penitent and make the penitent shake hands (or use any other gestures or symbols) to express the acceptance of forgiveness. A pastor could give absolution in the presence of all, encouraging the penitent and the other faithful who are present. There should be some kind of feasting, drink or meals partaken by all faithful present as a sign of giving thanks to God and re-admittance of the sinner into the community. In any case, I would encourage public reconciliation and absolution as the appropriate way to celebrate penance. This does not rule out the necessity of personal and integral confession and absolution, but if we want to restore the nobility of this sacrament we have to highlight this community aspect. The priest should take more time with the sinner and help him understand better the mystery of sin and forgiveness in the Church and the civil society.

4. Lastly, I would recommend a more flexible form of expressing one's sinfulness and desire for forgiveness. The famous *Isale* or banana beer and other Chagga traditional items can as well be utilised in this

³⁵ The Code of Canon Law, Canon 963

sacrament. For example, the sinner comes in public with *Isale* or any appropriate gesture and expresses his/her desire for forgiveness to the priest and to the assembly. The priest and the assembly will appraise the situation together and respond as the "*wako-mariwa*" used to do with the prayer of absolution which should probably be adapted. The celebration, then, ends in a joyful mood including dancing, eating and drinking.

CONCLUSION

So far I have tried to make clear some few concepts related to this topic and have situated the theme of sin and reconciliation in an African perspective. All this was an attempt to bring about the relevance of the Sacrament of penance and reconciliation to the people who celebrate it. Even though the Church, since the Second Vatican Council, has talked a lot about the urgency of renewal and contextualization of Liturgy, the implementation has been very slow indeed. Thus, even if I talked a little bit about the meaning and the principles of inculturation, this subject is becoming an outdated one now. Much has been said, though much is yet to be done.

My study of the Chagga religion has brought me to a deeper realisation that I was not aware of before. The notion of God and His demands on the part of the people were quite clear for the *Wachagga* even before the coming of Christianity. God was worshipped and adored in specific ways; sacrifices were offered to Him and the entire life was a continuous celebration through a variety of religious rituals. Furthermore, whenever people wronged one another or whenever the society felt to be alienated from God's goodness and care, ritual reconciliation and purification was performed, after which people felt reconciled with their God and with one another. As I have pointed out in this Essay, life for the *Wachagga* was a celebration in which each and every member of the society had a part to play. Culture and Religion were seen as one and the same thing, since everything was done in communion with the deity.

What I can say here is that the *Wachagga* had a strong belief in the supreme being, who was held above all else. The first Missionaries did a lot to implant Christianity among the *Wachagga*, but to some extent they overlooked the Chagga traditional methods of worship. The *Wachagga* now have what I can call two separate cultures: the Chagga traditional culture and the Christian culture. At times, these two cultures are so divorced from each other that the people live a life of “Double Standards”. There takes place what I can call “weekday faith/life” and “other-days life”. A *Mchagga* would attend the Church function very well, but afterwards would go to perform other rituals at home, even to the extent of consulting the diviners. In my own opinion, what is lacking here is satisfaction from the Church’s functions, and so it has to be obtained from somewhere else. Christian faith and liturgies were not incarnated well in the Chagga culture. Hence, the *Mchagga* fails to get satisfaction from these “foreign” God and liturgies. As long as Christianity does not take account of this, the Christian God and liturgies will always remain foreign to a *Mchagga*. What can we do as pastors? Can we, in any way, try to incorporate some of these traditional values (like including the names of the local ancestors) in our Christian liturgies? There are so many African values which can help in making the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation more appreciated, meaningful and intelligible to the African Christians. Many studies on the nature of African traditional societies have shown beyond doubt that the notion of sin and reconciliation has a very strong social dimension. They have also made it clear that Africa is

full of rich symbols, signs and gestures that can be used to make the liturgical celebration of penance and reconciliation more lively without risking the loss of its sacramental authenticity.

It was not my wish in this essay to give any impression that there is conflict between the social and individual dimensions of repentance and forgiveness. This is precisely so because the fact remains that sin is the result of a free decision by an individual and its forgiveness entails a genuine conversion of the sinner. Nevertheless, being reconciled to God involves getting reconciled to the community. I am, therefore, convinced that the two dimensions are equally important and indispensable. What I need to emphasise in this concluding remarks is that sin disrupts the social order and harmony of the community and in a similar manner reconciliation has to involve the community. In most cases it has to be a social phenomenon, rather than a secret conversation in the confessional box. I think this attempt will enhance the ecclesial nature of reconciliation ceremonies. In my opinion it will make them even more effective and appropriate.

I have come to understand that there are so many ways (yet unutilized) in which reconciliation can be celebrated in the Church, in a manner that appeals most to the people who celebrate it, thus making it a true celebration, like any other liturgical celebrations of the Church. Our cultures provide a variety of possibilities which the pastors can make use of, to improve our celebrations of penance and reconciliation. The only problem is: how many pastors are really knowledgeable in this area?

Or how many are interested in this adventure in the sense of being ready to spend their time to study and implement it?

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