Inculturation
and
Social Change

among the Savannah Societies of Western Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to show that, contrary to popular opinion, the inculturation of the Christian faith began to take place among Roman Catholic Christians of the societies of the western savannah area of Cameroon almost from the moment that they were first evangelised. A social, historical and theological perspective is employed.

The study suggests that the realisation of inculturation, which is a dynamic process linked to social change, has taken place at three levels. The first of these involved a change in the role of religion from its traditional function of affirming the socio-political system and the authority of a ruling elite to one whereby religion, particularly the relationship with the Christian Trinity, determines the pattern of relationships which constitute society and culture. The second level of inculturation was accomplished when Christianity became a positive social force through the activity of individual members of the Christian community who benefited from a deeper communion with the rest of the Church. In the midst of the enormous social changes taking place within savannah society in the 1990’s, most of which are negative, the Catholic Church has become not just the object of appeals for practical social, moral and political assistance, but has, at times, witnessed to the divine unity by the example of these within its own life. While Christians have not lived up fully to the demands required by their faith and have their own share of blame for the social difficulties being experienced in Cameroon at the present, there are signs that a striving for unity - patterned on the Trinity and evident in the flowering of small ecclesial groups and communities - is beginning to create a new culture which can be a sign and source of hope for the rest of society. This, perhaps, is evidence that a third level of inculturation is in the process of being realised.
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Anglophone Cameroon and the Western Savannah

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Appendix I Some Survey Results
When a man has several wives there is always the danger that he will favour one more than the others. The result, if he does so, is often a household at war. I find myself in similar circumstances because this presentation calls upon several disciplines: theology, sociology and history. I can only hope that some semblance of peace and order will reign among them.

Although both inculturation and social change are complex topics they do bear one feature in common which is that they are dynamic processes. That they have this quality springs from the fact that they are part of the human experience. The question of social change began to be seriously discussed by sociologists and anthropologists during the 1970’s. This was partly as result of the rather static view of culture which prevailed prior to that period, particularly in the work of the British anthropologists. I have the impression that this static view of culture pervades much of the current theological discussion about inculturation also. It is for this reason that I wish to explore the theme of inculturation from the perspective of culture as a fluid phenomenon.

Throughout the period before the Synod of African Bishops and after it ended on the 8th of May 1994, there seemed to be a general assumption that inculturation had never taken place in the Church in Africa. The impression was that after the Synod we, in Africa, would all begin to ‘inculturate’. This I think arose from an unfortunate but common misconception that inculturation is primarily concerned with liturgy and the use of symbols and other expressions of local cultures. My own research into the history of Christianity among the people of the western savannah area of Cameroon led me to understand that the first Christians of that area lived out their faith without losing their integrity as ‘Africans’. Baptism, in other words, did not turn them into Europeans despite the fact that the form of Christianity owed much to European history and culture. I shall argue that inculturation took place right from the beginning of the evangelisation of the savannah area and that it has continued throughout the
history of the Church in that region. The reason that I am able to argue this comes from the social view I take of the Church rather than focusing upon externals such as liturgy. I shall not, therefore, devote a great deal of attention to the symbolic and ritual expressions of either savannah culture or the Roman Catholic Church. The debate about whether expressions of culture are the culture itself is an interesting one but to examine that question here would, I feel, only cloud the issue. My own opinion would be that expressions of a particular society or culture only have meaning if that society or culture is socially viable.

The sources that I have used are primarily my own research from the period when I lived and worked in a remote parish in the mountains of western Cameroon, from 1982 until 1993. My main research was into the history of the Bangwa people which hopefully someday will be completed but I did carry out some small sociological research and some of the results of this are to be found in Appendix II. I am also indebted to the work of anthropologists such as Brain, Chilver and Karberry. Although I make little reference to their writings, the spirituality of Chiara Lubich, foundress of the Focolare Movement, and the theologies of Piero Coda and Alyward Shorter have been a source of inspiration both theologically and pastorally and acted as a springboard for developing my own ideas.

The area which this presentation examines is the western area of the high savannah of Cameroon (see map 2). The term ‘grasslands’ is synonymous with savannah and is used in order not to constantly repeat the word ‘savannah’. The western savannah is part of the anglophone region of Cameroon and although the people of this area are closely related culturally and socially with the Bamileke who live in francophone Cameroon I have deliberately excluded them from my discussions. The reason for this lies in their different experience both of colonialism and the method by which they were evangelised. While, in some respects, the experience of the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon bears much in common with that of the Roman Catholic Church, the limits of space compel me to confine myself to the experience of the latter with which I am more familiar.
Section 2 will examine The Roman Catholic Church with specific reference to the importance of unity within it. The idea of unity, within Catholic theology, is rooted in its understanding of the Trinity. This has an important place in any discussion about ‘Catholic’ inculturation and is closely linked to the Church’s understanding of culture and the social nature of Christianity. These ideas lie at the heart of all the Synod’s discussions and proposals.

In Section 3 I shall look at the role which religion played in the savannah societies of western Cameroon to show its importance in the social and political system. This had a great significance for the way in which individuals of that society converted to Christianity and their expectations of their new-found faith.

Section 4 will examine the historical development of the Church in the savannah area. I shall not dwell too much on specific historical details but only use some to show that inculturation did, in fact, take place at various stages and on different levels.
At first glance, the documents of the African Synod and Pope John Paul’s post-Synodal exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, appear to be something of a disappointment if one is looking for concrete examples of and suggestions on how to implement the whole idea of inculturation. In fact, although some theological ideas are presented, the pronouncements these documents make about inculturation tend not only to be rather vague but sometimes suggest that there is even a deliberate wish that they be so. Such an approach is not new in documents issuing from the numerous synods held within the Roman Catholic Church. There is a certain security to be gained in stating generalities since it enables one to keep one’s options open on the particulars. It is what lies between the lines which constitutes the real discussion, the real agenda. Official gatherings in the Catholic Church, such as the Synod of African bishops, have always to be seen within the context of what is going on within the whole Church. Equally, the communiqués of the African synod and *Ecclesia in Africa* reflect not only the concerns of the African bishops and the Church’s central administration in Rome, but also much about the relationship which exists between the Vatican and the Church throughout the world. *Ecclesia in Africa*, particularly, is a masterpiece of subtlety in this respect.

2.1 Unity and the Catholic Church

The fact that the long awaited *African* Synod was eventually held in *Rome* was interpreted somewhat negatively in some quarters, notably by the Western ‘liberal’ press and by prominent African theologians such as Kwame Bediako of Ghana.\(^1\) Somehow the location of the Synod was seen as diminishing its ‘African-ness’ which they saw as being the main priority. Such criticism was quite valid from their perspective.

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\(^1\) Kwame Bediako’s comments were offered during a lecture at New College, Edinburgh, 14th February 1995.
From a Roman Catholic viewpoint, however, it is the unity of all the parts of the Church which is paramount. Structurally, that unity is also expressed in the relationship of each episcopal conference with the Pope and the pontifical commissions. Without that unity the parts have no meaning or identity. Ultimately, international or cultural boundaries, while taken into consideration, do not occupy the upper levels on the list of the Church’s priorities. For those of a democratic persuasion such a scheme can appear either alien or reminiscent of a monarchical system of government worthy of protest and reform. It is certainly open to abuse and the numerous instances of authoritarianism within the Catholic Church over the centuries are ample proof of this. However, it would be shortsighted to understand the Church’s system of government and authority as merely a medieval relic.

Many of the expectations of the Synod which were expressed by African theologians and intellectuals, by western liberal theologians and the western press often focused on the demand for autonomy for the African Church. There were many reasons for this. Francophone theologians and intellectuals, in particular, were airing their lingering neuroses about the colonial past. Others were reacting to the current heavy-handed and rather one-sided, negative, relationship which sometimes exists between the papal magisterium and the magisterium of the local bishops in Africa and elsewhere. The question of a compulsory celibacy for the clergy made its, by now, customary appearance prior to any synod since it especially does not seem to work in Africa. Dirty linen abounded. Few of these critics addressed the question of the unity of the Church. Those who did tended to end up advocating something similar to that which exists between the churches of the Anglican communion. This would involve considerable problems, not the least of which would be theological. It might just be simpler to become Anglicans. Those attending the Synod were doubtless aware of all the many problems affecting the Church in Africa. They probably suffered from them and were more familiar with them than those who make careers out of criticism. It is
they who have to deal with the problems and by making the unity of the Church the main priority, they were not ignoring the confusing mass of issues but trusting that it is within that striving for unity that the Spirit of God can most effectively bring some order out of chaos and ultimately indicate solutions.

2.2 **Ecclesial Unity and Authority within the Catholic Church**

At this point, therefore, a brief examination of the Roman Catholic understanding of ecclesial unity, authority and government is necessary since not only does it affect everything within the Church but must play an integral part of any examination of the Roman Catholic vision of inculturation, both past and present. Ideally, it is Christ who governs the Church. His presence within the Church is a free gift but its effectiveness is enhanced by the degree of charity which exists among the Church’s members. In a social sense the hierarchy is to be a expression of this charity, not simply as a figurehead or in liturgical terms, but above all through the charism of discerning the implications of Christ’s presence for the everyday life of the Church’s members and for the whole human reality. That the charism of discernment resides in the hierarchy is founded on the belief that Christ chose to incarnate his concern for the Church through the apostles and their successors. It is with his promise of the Spirit, the giver of charisms, that Christ endows the hierarchy with the means of realising the unity, the Trinitarian unity, which is the essence of the life of his followers.

The unique authority pertaining to the hierarchy has its origin in the fact that as the charism of discernment contains the will of Christ for his Church, it

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3 The use of the idea of the charism of discernment as a foundation for understanding the role and identity of the hierarchy is not commonly used in Catholic circles. However, it is an understanding which can be traced through the writings of Paul, the Early Fathers such as Origen and Ignatius of Antioch, to the medieval period whereafter it gained enormous importance in the spirituality of the Jesuits who had such an enormous impact on Catholic spirituality and thinking in the period following the Council of Trent. An understanding of the Church and the hierarchy from the perspective of the charism of discernment strikes me as more appropriate, even more in tune with African thinking, than the decree Christus Dominus of Vatican II. It also, I believe, reflects the theological understanding of collegiality and unity which has developed since the Council, particularly in the writings of Paul VI who in many ways redefined both collegiality and the papacy in modern times.
follows that those who, under the guidance of the Spirit, make that will known are charged with the responsibility of seeing that it is carried out. Thus, the charism of discernment contains both the authority to discern and the authority to decree what is perceived as the will of Christ. It is obvious that this set of ideas forms a closed system, i.e. Christ has chosen the hierarchy as the instruments of revealing his will for the Church - we know this because the hierarchy has told us. The entire system can only be validated by faith. However, the fact that the Church has survived and spread the Gospel throughout the centuries, despite the errors and limitations of its members, can arguably be taken as proof that the presence of Christ has prevailed.

2.3 Multiculturalism and Ecclesial Unity

Although collegiality, the communion of bishops with the Pope at their head, is a concept which has existed in the Church since the early times, it is only since the Second Vatican Council that collegiality has been exercised to any real effect\(^5\). The emergence of a truer collegiality and the growing recognition of the multiplicity of charisms in the Church, particularly those among the laity, reflects an awareness not only that the Spirit is equally active outwith the hierarchy but also that the life of the Church consists in the experience of the whole people of God. The move away from a hierarchical/clerical-dominated model of the Church, at least in spirit, reveals a greater richness in the Church but, in the very revealing, creates new possibilities, new ways of ‘being’ Church which hitherto would have been unthinkable. The lay ministries, the lay apostolate, the lay ecclesial movements, parish and diocesan councils, base communities, the justice and peace commissions - all of these, for example, have become an integral part of the life of the Church in the post-conciliar period. They are an expression of the richness in the life of the Church but they have also revealed that variety of expression, a greater communion and sharing of responsibility among the

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\(^4\) Cf. Mk. 8:27-30 and Jn. 20:23.

\(^5\) See EIA, 15-18
Church’s members, actually enlivens the Church and makes it more open to being a sign of hope to the world.

The African Synod is part of this progression towards a greater communion and variety of expression in the Church’s life under the guidance of the Spirit. However, the Synod marks a significant development in implementing the notion of multiculturalism within the Catholic Church during the post-conciliar era. Aylward Shorter sees multiculturalism as having begun with Vatican II, particularly with the ‘virtual abolition of Latin as the language of the Catholic liturgy.’6 The use of vernacular languages was welcomed throughout the Church despite a considerable amount of feet dragging on the part of Vatican officials who had to approve the liturgical texts. Language, however, is closely tied to culture. In many ways the vernacular translations of liturgies were often literal trans-verbalisations of the standard Latin version. In the cross-over from one language to another, the Judeo-Greco formulations of the Christian mysteries remained intact. They were often incomprehensible to those who did not belong to a culture which had its origins in Judeo-Greco thinking. The expression of liturgies, catechetics and doctrines, therefore, has effectively continued to be dominated by European cognitive patterns. Even in the case of the Zaïrean Mass, which took almost twenty years to be approved, enormous concessions at a textual level had to be made before it was finally accepted by Rome. It is really with the African Synod, I would argue, that we have an acceptance of the notion of real multiculturalism within the Church. Despite the continuing hesitancy and extreme caution on the part of Rome, the Synod marks the acceptance of the principle that Sacred Scripture and the Apostolic Tradition, originating historically in Judeo-Greco culture, can be expressed faithfully in other cultures, through their languages and using the philosophical and theological categories particular to them. However, it has to be recognised that many of these cultures do not have a language or cognitive system capable of expressing the full depth of meaning contained in the Christian mysteries. They lack (prior to evangelisation) the experience of the revelation of God in Christ within their own
culture, that is, the data upon which theologising, for example, can produce doctrine and which also, as part of an historical process, cumulatively refines the categories and methodology required for theologising. The Christ event was as equally new to Jews and Helenists of the first century as it is for the Kikuyu, Baganda, Bamileke or Igbos of the twentieth. The delicate task facing philosophers, theologians, translators, pastors and all involved in evangelisation is to remain faithful to Scripture and the Apostolic Tradition while utilising, enhancing and developing traditional categories of thought and modes of expression when presenting or living out Christianity.

It can be argued that once a particular cultural group begins to interpret its own experience of Christ then there is a danger that those belonging to that group may claim that their own form of Christianity distinguishes them from other cultural forms to such an extent that ecclesial unity and universality at the level of real communion are put in doubt. A mystical understanding of unity might be acceptable but the concept of being subject to a centre or to the wider implications of collegiality would be abhorrent. This would, in other words, be a position of cultural relativism. However, two points must be borne in mind. The first is that the original experience of Christianity was conducted in the context of contact with another culture. The fact that Christianity then develops from that first encounter and later establishes itself firmly within the new cultural setting is proof that Christianity, its beliefs and practices, is not only capable of crossing cultural divides but suggests that it can do so constantly. This is one of the basic principles involved in acculturation. The second point to be kept in mind and which is closely related to the first, is that culture is a category of interaction. That is why it is always evolving. Interaction has always taken place between African societies. We shall see this in the next section when we come to deal with traditional religion. Cultural relativism, therefore, is impossible. However, attempts at cultural relativism may be made under the guise of another philosophy for various reasons, usually as part of a desire for social or political

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6 Shorter, 1988:22
7 Cf. EIA, 62
power or to achieve independence from a centre which resides in another culture. This is a denial of the communion which is integral to the life of the Church. Multiculturalism within the Church implies a more authentic communion not simply within a local Church but with the universal ecclesial reality. The acceptance of multiculturalism, therefore, is not a threat to unity but a deeper affirmation of it. It requires a greater commitment from the parts to adhere more closely to the whole for without this the identity of the Church would cease to conform to what Jesus prayed to the Father for: ‘Father, may they all be one. May they be one as you and I are one.’

The fear of losing control of the different parts of the Church, even of the possibility of its disintegration or the development of syncretism is perhaps the all-abiding fear of Vatican officials. The danger, certainly, is real but progress always requires an act of faith both in the other members of the Church and in the action of the Holy Spirit. It requires a faith in unity not simply as a one way process but as a mutual exchange between Rome and the other parts of the Church. The shift from monoculturalism to multiculturalism, sealed at the Synod, does not diminish the importance of the unity and universality which must characterise the Church. Everything in the life of the Church must continue to affirm that unity in some way.

The hierarchy’s charism of discerning is not compromised by multiculturalism. Instead it demands a broader understanding of humanity with regard to the implications of all the Christian mysteries, from the Incarnation through to Pentecost. If the hierarchy responds to the promptings of the Spirit to widen the variety of forms of expressing the Christian mysteries so that they represent a fuller expression of the whole of humanity, then it is not unreasonable to assume that, in the Divine economy, an accompanying grace will be given by the Spirit to

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8 The Vatican’s reservations about the Zaïrean Mass, mentioned earlier, were based on a suspicion that the liturgy was a covert expression of President Mobuto’s programme of Authenticité which sought to affirm African culture as part of a reaction to the Europeanisation which took place during the colonial experience.

9 Jn. 17:21
enable them to exercise their charisms to greater effect. Equally, if the Christian mysteries are to penetrate more fully into all the multiple expressions - cultures - of humanity, then there is surely a greater need for the hierarchy’s charism of discernment. That requires an obedience - an unpopular word in western society - which is rooted in a belief in God’s love. Obedience, the free and loving gift of the will as an act of sharing in the mystery of the Cross, still remains the most effective way in which the Spirit can be released in order to create a deeper communion within the Church.

No one denies the need for unity and universality, not even the most extreme elements of the Church’s liberal wing. The problems arise when a practical definition of these is sought or proposed. Unfortunately, as with many issues in the Church, this debate has been largely dominated by the situation of the Church in Europe and has been conducted principally by Europeans. It has something of the nature of Plato’s discussion about the meaning of shadows on the wall of a cave. Ideas as to what they represent are plentiful but the lack of practical experience renders the debate somewhat unreal. The breakdown of European society has not yet arrived but the dearth of social communion and the increasing sense of alienation are marks of a profound social and cultural crisis. To put it briefly, the crisis in European culture and society makes it difficult for the Church in Europe to arrive at a meaningful understanding of ecclesial unity because, like the rest of society, it does not have a current experience of social unity upon which it can base or apply such an understanding.

The centre of Christianity has shifted to the southern world in more ways than one. It is not simply a question of numbers, it is also a question of having the social prerequisites to form a Church. The discovery of what unity and universality mean in practice in the modern world was one of the tasks given to the Synod by the Church. Africa perhaps is the best place where this experiment can be carried out. The Church in Sub-Saharan Africa does not have the baggage

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10 See Plato, Republic, 514a-517b.
11 See H. Rootmaaker, Western Art and the Death of a Culture (1972).
of a long Christian tradition such as the Church in the West. It also does not suffer from the depressing spectacle of decreasing numbers or a society losing its cohesion because of an over-emphasis on individualism. Above all, Africa’s principal contribution to the future of the Church is that the sense of social unity is still alive and active at the level of ordinary life.

While it appears that the future of Christianity lies south of the equator, Rome will always have a particular significance in terms of being the centre and symbol of the unity of the Catholic Church. Given the importance of symbols within many of the cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly those relating to the unity of a people, it can be argued that Rome was almost the only place that the African bishops could meet and can be interpreted as an act of inculturation in itself\(^\text{12}\). In a profound way, it was a demonstration of the trans-cultural quality of unity which is typically created by the Spirit. That unity is, at one and the same moment, an expression both of the soul of the African socio-cultural reality and the most singularly defining characteristic and ideal of the Church, to be the presence of the Trinity among humanity.

The fact that the unity of the African Church with the rest of the Church, and particularly with the Pontiff, is one of the recurring motifs running throughout Ecclesia in Africa should not be interpreted negatively as Rome wishing to stress its control over the African Church. Interspersed throughout John Paul II’s Synodal Exhortation are numerous examples of the source of joy which he has found in the Church in Africa. Taken together with his comments and speeches during his many visits to Africa, we are left with the impression that John Paul II seems convinced that the Church needs Africa because of the hope it promises for the future of the whole Church. This is evident in his preface to Ecclesia in Africa where he saw the primary aim of the Synod as being to strengthen the

\(^\text{12}\) In a private conversation with Cardinal Tumi of Cameroon, the Chairman of the Preparatory Committee for the Synod, he informed me that almost all the bishops preferred Rome as a venue since it not only avoided a certain rivalry about which major city on the continent was the capital of Catholicism in Africa but also that, given the importance of the event, they felt that everyone should appear to be equal. However, financial and logistical reasons also played a part.
communion of bishops but also as having an immense significance and interest for the whole Church. \(^{13}\)

### 2.4 Culture and Social Change

During discussions of the *Lineamenta*, the first of the guideline documents used for the consultations prior to the Synod, I was constantly struck by the fact that almost all of us involved tended to understand inculturation exclusively in liturgical terms. At times we would branch out to examine topics such as church architecture, the veneration of ancestors and the thorny question of witchcraft and illness. Inculturation, therefore, was largely seen as dealing with the external expressions of faith. Rarely did we make the connection between inculturation and social issues. This tendency is even apparent in some of the papers presented to the Synod by some of the African bishops. The bulk of the *Lineamenta*, the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the Synod propositions and *Ecclesia in Africa*, however, is concerned with social issues and the numerous social and political problems affecting Africa and the Church’s mission. To maintain a mental separation between the externals of faith and social questions can exacerbate the unhealthy division which exists in the minds of many Christians between ‘religiosity’ and a truly committed Christian life. This has sometimes been described as the ‘Sunday Christian’ syndrome. It is most prevalent where religiosity, often meaning a regular participation in the Church’s liturgy, tends to be the result of some form of social pressure. The question of true commitment is less easy to determine and, therefore, is left open to such an extent that it can be almost considered as optional. This mentality is a denial of the fundamental meaning of Christian culture. It is, in effect, utilising the expressions of Christian culture to serve another culture. This, perhaps, is evident among the Latin societies such as Italy, Spain, France and parts of South America. A lot of the confusion surrounding inculturation is due to the very hazy understanding of culture we employ when speaking or thinking about Christianity. It is perhaps useful at this point to clarify what we mean by culture.

\(^{13}\) *EIA*, 17-19.
There are thousands of definitions of culture. I offer the following one: *culture is a self-sustaining pattern of human interactions*. The pattern of interactions is the nature in which relationships are conducted according to influences from experience, the environment, necessities and expectations. These can be described as the determining factors of culture. The pattern of interactions normally finds expression through social institutions, beliefs and laws of conduct. It is in the nature of culture that it is dynamic because each interaction is capable of having some effect upon the overall pattern of interactions existing within the culture. The ‘new’ pattern affects the manner in which subsequent interactions are then carried out. It is, in other words, a self-generating system. This dynamism can also affect the expressions of a culture such as its symbols, institutions and codes of accepted conduct.

The degree of impact which an interaction has upon the whole pattern, its capacity to change or dominate the nature of interactions, is an indication of social power and control. If an interaction promotes the self-sustaining quality of the pattern, then it consequently strengthens the unity of the culture and the social institutions.

Social change is when the pattern of interactions is altered in some way. Change which takes place because of interactions within the group can be termed as being internally induced social change. When change occurs as a result of interaction with persons, institutions, groups, ideas or forces outwith the ‘home’ culture then we can speak of social change as being externally induced. In a relatively stable culture, innovations which arise within the society usually do not have a socially disorganising capacity as those which enter from without. All societies have mechanisms for dealing with the ‘new’. External precipitants of social change, however, are frequently much more difficult to deal with and if they are capable of introducing new modes of interacting, which are accepted at a grass-roots level, then they can significantly change the culture and society. The new economic opportunities which developed during the colonial period, for
example, were largely responsible for the weakening of the traditional system of
government in the western part of Cameroon administered by the British.

2.5 The Incarnation, the Trinity and Inculturation

The Synod linked the idea of inculturation with all the Christian mysteries: the
Incarnation, the Redemption, the Paschal Mystery and Pentecost\textsuperscript{14}. However, out
of all of these it seems to note a particular connection with the Incarnation. The
Synod Fathers, in fact, recalled John Paul II’s definition of inculturation as being
‘the process by which “catechesis ‘takes flesh’ in the various cultures”’.\textsuperscript{15} In both
the Incarnation and inculturation the object and strategy are the same. God
becomes Man in order to bring about the redemption and this is achieved by the
Divine penetrating the human reality completely, even to the experiencing of
abandonment and death. Human reality, however, does not exist in the abstract\textsuperscript{16}. It
must be linked to history and to a particular human culture. By extension, the
same must apply to the Incarnation and inculturation. However, inculturation is
an extension of the Incarnation. With the latter we have the Divine directly and
fully entering a particular cultural context as a means of entering the context of
all humanity. The former, inculturation, which is a development from the
Incarnation, is the process whereby God enters one cultural context from another.

The Incarnation was the revelation of God as \textit{Trinity}. This is what is
specifically ‘new’ about Christianity and what distinguishes it not only from the
traditional religions of Africa but from all the other religions of the world. God \textit{as}
Trinity must have a deep significance for inculturation and, in fact, must
determine our whole understanding of it.

Personhood can be described as the capacity to transcend one’s own
particularity and be able to interact with the ‘Other’. This notion of ‘person’ is
ascribed to God the Father and God the Son. Even if these terms, ‘Father’ and

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{EIA}, 60-61
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{EIA}, 59 and John Paul II, 1979:53
‘Son’, are analogous, the process taking place within the Godhead is only understandable through the notion of personhood and interaction\textsuperscript{17}. The interaction which exists between the Father and the Son consists in a relatedness which involves a communication with the other which is absolute in character, i.e. the Father is (completely) in the Son and the Son is (completely) in the Father. This understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son is one of the central themes running throughout John’s Gospel where we see Jesus constantly defining himself in terms of his relationship with the Father. The Father and the Son are one but still retain their particular identities. They are who they are precisely because each is absolutely in the other. The absolute nature of their interaction derives from the absolute manner in which they interact. This, in turn, derives from and affirms the absoluteness of their personhood. What we have here is dynamic. It is an eternal process which is always new, never static. However, the interaction between the Father and the Son, the unity which that relationship \textit{is}, is such that, in itself, it too displays the characteristics of personhood. The interaction between the Father and the Son is neither one of them, nor is it both since that would violate the unity which must exclude the domination of one over the other. Their interaction is something else. The interaction draws its being from \textit{being in the other}, in this case, in the Father and the Son concurrently. It itself, in other words, \textit{is} and is related to that which it is not. This is the Holy Spirit\textsuperscript{18}.

We often speak of the Trinity as a community. We can perhaps, in a limited sense, even use the expression ‘culture’ in relation to the Trinity since we seem to have all the components which make up a culture: a self-sustaining pattern of interactions. We can also observe the pattern of this Trinitarian culture as being present in creation, above all in Man who, as the image of the Trinity, has personhood and the capacity to interact. Salvation history can be read using the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{16} Cf. } \textit{EIA}, \text{\textsuperscript{17} Cf. Rahner 1975:103} \text{\textsuperscript{18} To paraphrase St. Thomas Aquinas, the one thing I am sure of is that what I have written about the Trinity is a heresy of some sort or other (See Aquinas, } \textit{Summa}, \text{\textsuperscript{17}§154). However, I have tried to keep company with Karl Rahner. (See Rahner, 1975:24-35, 101-103)}\]
model of cultures interacting with one another. In this case the Trinitarian culture influences the culture(s) of Man but, because of its absoluteness, is not changed itself.

In Christ, the incarnate Word, the immanent life of God takes on a human dimension and, in so doing, perfects personhood in human terms. The abandonment of Christ on the Cross, when he felt forsaken by the Father, constituted, in human terms, the ultimate loss of self as an act of being in the Other, in the Father. This moment was the absolutising of human transcendence since it conformed to the pattern of Trinitarian interaction by virtue of the fact that Christ was both God and Man. The consequence of this interaction was the resurrection, the transformation of the entire human reality. In drawing all men to himself, therefore, Christ transforms human personhood and the human way of interacting. The Trinitarian culture can be summarised as ‘love one another as I have loved you.’ Human interaction is in a state of continual transformation by Christ but is itself the locus of encounter with him. To draw closer to the person of Christ means to interact in a way which conforms to his nature as God and Man. Interaction implies the social. It is in human relationships modelled on the Trinity and on Christ’s relationship with humanity that we are drawn not only in Christ to the Father but in Christ to one another. The Divine culture is unity and where we have unity, or at least the desire for it, we have the presence of God among humanity19. All humanity and all creation are in an evolving, dynamic process of being drawn together in him, the Omega Point20.

The Spirit, as the interaction between the Father and the Son, will always seek the unity of all things. He is the pattern of love and the principle which draws order, love and coherent relatedness, out of chaos21 and out of the nothingness

19 See Mt. 18:20
20 See the work of Teilhard de Chardin, especially The Phenomenon of Man, (1959:257) and The Mass on the World in “Hymn of the Universe” (1965:75-92). There is, in fact, a close affiliation between the understanding of the Trinity we find in Process Theology, of which Teilhard can be seen as being an exponent, and the cultural model which I am employing above. See also A. N. Whitehead’s Process and Reality (1957).
21 Gn. 1:1-2
which results from the will to transcend one’s self to be ‘in’ the Other. He is present in the interaction with Christ which we call the Church and it is there that he operates through the charisms mentioned earlier which are a consequence, we can say a social consequence, of Christ’s presence in the world. It is he who renders the incarnation possible and it is he who is the agent of inculturation.

The Spirit, however, is not solely confined to a conscious interaction with Christ. As the principle of unity, he was at work in the world before the Incarnation in the hearts of all mankind. His presence is transhistorical and transcultural and is evident whenever Man exercises his personhood, i.e. his capacity to transcend himself and interact with the Other out of love. As a created and relating being, Man is constantly in relation to God through the Spirit. An awareness of and reflection upon that relationship with the Divine can lead to an understanding of the demands it makes. Because of the Spirit, an individual can achieve a limited incarnation of all that is potentially good within himself. Such is the power of the Spirit that Man, despite his circumstances, is not a victim of history, i.e. he can receive salvation despite not having had the Good News announced to him. It is this idea which lies behind Justin’s *semina Verbi*, referred to by the Synod22, Karl Rahner’s *anonymous Christians*23 and the Church’s affirmation that salvation outside the Church is possible24. This process, which the Spirit carries out in the relationship of every individual with the Divine, is notoriously complex and is both difficult to define and determine with exactness.

We can affirm one thing, however: because of his finiteness and the limitations which that imposes upon his way of interacting, Man cannot achieve a social unity which takes account of the wholeness of the other or of the absoluteness of God. There will always be some imbalance in the process of interaction which will translate into the particular social and cultural context. A social ‘unity’ in these circumstances is usually achieved through some form of domination in the

22 See *Proposito* 42 and *EIA*, 67
24 *Lumen Gentium*, 36-45
relations between men and/or through the manipulation of Man’s capacity to interact with the Divine, the supernatural and the absolute. This, therefore, is why religion in some traditional African cultures can become a social tool for a ruling elite.

Social unity can only come about through a relationship with Christ, the locus of all perfecting interaction between God and Man and between men. Salvation cannot be an individual affair. It fruits must be social since the fundamental characteristic of Man and the Trinity resides in communion. Inculturation must address all forms of interaction taking place within a particular culture and society. Christianity must transform cultures by radically altering the nature of relationships within society - at the level of individual to individual and that existing between an individual and his society’s institutions - so that the power of the Spirit can recreate the society. The distinction between external and internal factors precipitating social change becomes somewhat blurred since it is the Spirit who is active in as many possibilities as he can find. The Church might initially find itself as an alien, external agent of social and cultural change but, that its proposals are accepted by some members of the society, is the work of the Spirit. For the Church to advance in a particular society requires that it has a social impact and that it becomes socially visible as a new pattern of interaction which promotes social unity. Evangelisation and inculturation, in other words, can only be valid if they are rooted in relationships which conform to the will of the Father, the example of Christ and are open to the grace-filled inspiration of the Spirit.

Taking into account the Trinitarian implications of the Incarnation and the concept of ‘divine’ culture mentioned above, the definition of inculturation presented by Fr. Pedro Arrup S.J. will perhaps serve as a succinct way of summing up the major ideas I have presented so far about inculturation:

[Inculturation is...]
The incarnation of the Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it so as to bring about a ‘new creation’.  

In taking the Incarnation as a starting point for any subsequent ideas about inculturation, the Synod laid a Trinitarian foundation to its thought. But it was also advancing a Trinitarian ‘culture’ which can speak to all mankind. If this is the basis, then there is a hope that European culture will become less dominant in the life of the Church. Two issues, however, remain constant. The first is that evangelisation and inculturation can only be meaningful if they emerge from an experience of unity. In this case, ecclesial unity. Secondly, salvation, the bringing about of a ‘new creation’ in the particular culture and society where it is hoped the Gospel will take root, can only be achieved by addressing the modes of interaction taking place within that social context. This is why the Synod did not devote a great deal of its energies to ‘expressions’ of inculturation such as liturgies. The bulk of the Synod’s proposals and those contained in John Paul’s *Ecclesia in Africa* are about the social and political problems affecting Africa. The Church, as a source of hope, sees its mission no longer as one of simply winning converts but of being a force which can transform African societies and cultures so that they can be a sign of hope for the world.

### 2.6 Has Inculturation already taken place?

One of the major difficulties for those participating in the Synod was the fact that African cultures are so diverse, even within individual dioceses, that the adoption of a single, concrete, approach to inculturation seemed impossible. My own impression is that if the Church has established itself in many parts of Africa and continues to grow, then this phenomenon itself indicates that Christianity has taken root in African culture already. Perhaps, in exerting a great deal of our efforts in baptising, providing the sacraments and establishing the official

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25 In Shorter, 1988:11
structures of the Church, we have been unaware of the full extent of the Spirit’s quiet labours in the hearts of the faithful. Perhaps we will gain some idea about how to bring about a deeper inculturation by looking at the experience of Christians in Africa during the past and in the present.

One example of where such inculturation did take place was among the Christians of the western savannah of Cameroon. Before examining those instances of inculturation it is necessary to present an outline of the social and cultural context of savannah society.
3. RELIGION AND THE SAVANNAH SOCIETIES OF WESTERN CAMEROON

3.1 Religion and Traditional African Society

As a system of beliefs and practices, a religion may serve many functions. Perhaps the most fundamental of these is to provide a means whereby individuals and communities can express their relationship with the absolute and the supernatural. The individual’s relationship with an all-powerful, benevolent creator god would seem to be one of the constants in the psychology of most people in sub-Saharan Africa. Even with all the social changes which have occurred in African societies during the 20th century, including the disappearance of traditional religion in many places, that personal awareness of God’s loving presence still persists and is often spontaneously expressed in everyday conversation.

Prior to the arrival of Christianity or Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa there was effectively no such thing as religious choice. A person was obliged to adhere to the religious beliefs and practices of the group into which they had been born. These were taught as part of the general enculturation of the group’s members. Religion did not exist outwith the cultural context in which it functioned but supported the view of the world as it was understood by the society. If we examine the world views which existed in most African societies in the pre-colonial period we can see that there was a general belief that the universe was essentially conformed by a principle of order. Phenomena which apparently disobeyed these principles were explained as being the result of an individual will which sought to gain a personal advantage or to control the universe for its own ends. ‘Disorder’, in this view, was not random or impersonal but a direct attempt to re-arrange the order of things. It was, in other words, an attempt to usurp the status quo. Thus, disorders such as illness, natural disasters, madness and death were capable of being explained in a logical manner according to the

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26 See Shorter 1988:41-42
particular cosmology of the society. Such a view was essentially conservative, i.e. it favoured the existing order, and was reflected in the socio-political systems of most African societies.

There is, I believe, a correlation between the complexity of a society’s religious beliefs and the nature of its socio-political system. The rule would seem to be that the more complex the social system, then the more complex will be the religious system. This would seem to borne out if we compare, for example, the cosmology and social system of Khoisan groups in southern Africa\textsuperscript{27} with that of other more complex societies such as the Yoruba of Nigeria, the Baganda of Uganda, the Ufipa and Ulungu of Tanzania and the Bamileke kingdoms of Cameroon. However, we can perhaps advance the idea of this correlation one step further and suggest that religion in pre-colonial African societies would seem to be determined by the social. It was subject to it. This perhaps becomes more apparent if we examine the role of religion in the savannah societies of Cameroon in more detail.

3.2 Religion and the Establishment of the Savannah Kingdoms

The end of the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries were turbulent times in the savannah region of Cameroon. In terms of social change, it ranks with the post colonial period. In the north, Uthman Dan Fodio sought to extend the territory of his Fulani empire and to spread the domination of Islam further south\textsuperscript{28}. By the middle of the 19th century the advance had been halted just north of Fumban by the Bamum. However, the southward push of the Fulani created not simply mass panic but also an enormous amount of population displacement. If we examine the oral history of most groups in the savannah region we quickly discover that almost none of them claim to have lived in their current location for

\textsuperscript{27} The Khoisan, who usually live together in nomadic bands, have very little in the way of fixed social structures apart from the basic family unit. Even the numbers and membership of bands are constantly changing (See Barnard 1992). The Khoisan tend to be nomadic also in their religious ideas and practices which vary on a daily basis not just from group to group or from band to band but even from individual to individual (Silberbauer 1981:114 and Barnard 1988:218). The fluid Khoisan ‘religion’ seems to reflect the fluidity of Khoisan society.
more than five or six generations, i.e. roughly a period of between 150 and 200 years. All their myths of origin refer to the migration of an ancestor and his family or even of the whole people\textsuperscript{29}. There does not seem to be any evidence that the societies of the pre-migration era were as large or as socially organised as those of the post-migration period. What indications there are would seem to suggest that chiefdoms were small and consisted of relatives of a common patriarch. Inter-village conflicts occurred, but by and large there was a fair degree of peaceful co-existence.

The middle of the 19th century, however, saw the establishment of the savannah kingdoms which came to be governed by powerful rulers called \textit{Fons}. With time these kingdoms developed elaborate social structures with the Fon heading a hierarchy of retainers, counsellors, chiefs, sub-chiefs and nobles\textsuperscript{30}. The strict hierarchical nature of these new societies can perhaps be explained as being the result of several factors. One of the consequences of the turmoil and uncertainty created by the wars with the Fulani was a deep-seated desire for security. The wars probably also created a certain military mentality among the new rulers. Discipline and authority ensured stability. In the mêlée created by the wars with the Fulani, smaller land wars erupted in a chain reaction all over the grasslands as those who had been displaced sought somewhere new to settle\textsuperscript{31}. Frequently those captured by the victors became their slaves and were either kept as retainers, wives or sold to other groups. This in itself contributed largely to the creation of more layers of hierarchy which further affirmed the authority of the upper echelons. The considerable amount of cross-fertilisation of different peoples, ideas and beliefs not only produced new societies but new cultural forms as well. One of the most common features to become apparent when we analyse the savannah cultures is that they were highly eclectic. The social and political structures, the symbols and rituals of neighbouring and even distant groups were adopted or re-invented. In the context of the developing savannah kingdoms of

\textsuperscript{28} See Horton 1975:384-385, also Curtin 1971.
\textsuperscript{29} See Brain 1971:6; Chilver & Karberry 1971: 56-60.
\textsuperscript{30} See Burnham 1980; Chilver & Karberry 1971: 96; Lecoq 1953 and especially Warnier 1985:53-96.
the second half of the 19th century, everything was conditioned to satisfying social and political stability. Religion was one such element in this process and came to function more and more as an instrument which would affirm the social and political authority of the powerful and justify the hierarchical character of the societies they ruled.

### 3.3 Fon Fontem Asonganyi

Among the Fons of the savannah cultures, Fontem Asonganyi was perhaps one of the best examples of social, political and cultural creativity. At the time of his succession in 1889, Asonganyi’s ‘kingdom’ was one of many small chiefdoms which had been founded by an ancestor who had migrated from the grasslands probably at the end of the 17th century. Through a mixture of guile, alliances and plain old violence, he absorbed many of the previously independent chiefdoms into his own and expanded his territory considerably by making war on the Mbo to the south and the Bayang to the west. This expansion gave him control over vast areas of palm groves where his slaves worked to produce oil which was then sold at the markets on the grasslands. The economy of Lebang flourished greatly during Asonganyi’s reign. The core of his strategy was to establish himself as the most important middle-man in a trading system which linked the savannah and highlands with the coastal region which supplied guns, fish and European articles. Like all the savannah societies, a highly competitive spirit prevailed among the members of the Lebang society. Such ambition needed to be restrained and controlled, otherwise a chief or noble might easily find himself a victim of the intrigue and conspiracy which dominated the life of the royal courts. Asonganyi himself usurped the throne from his brother.

To consolidate the position he had won for himself through war and trade, Asonganyi adapted and expanded the role of the traditional secret societies which

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32 Cf. Brain 1971: 7-8
had been brought originally from the grasslands. The most powerful of these, *Troh* (the Night Society) was an adaptation of the *Aka* (The Elephant Society) which had come from the savannah and which acted as a form of secret police.

The Night Society was used to punish criminals and to keep order but it was used above all to enforce the will of Asonganyi on his sub-chiefs and the population. The sense of terror which members of the *Troh* engendered among the populace when they made their appearance - usually dressed in sackcloth, leaves, masks and carrying longs staves - was not simply because of their capacity for physical violence and destruction. The real power of *Troh* lay in their spiritual, mystical abilities. The members of the society met at night with their leader, the Fon. During their rituals they were believed to transform themselves into supernatural beasts which resembled leopards, elephants, snakes and other ferocious animals. The whole company would then ‘fly’ to the top of a mountain peak where they feasted on human flesh. The ritual, in effect, unleashed their power as ‘witches’, a term which signified evil spirits which have the capacity of ‘eating’ the spirits of others. What is interesting is that anyone accused of witchcraft outwith the society was punished severely, even with hanging. Spiritual power, either good or evil, could only be exercised legitimately by the Fon and his inner circle.

Although an individual in Lebang would pray to the creator god and call upon his blessing, the relationship with more ‘local’ gods and with one’s ancestors was often more important, practised more frequently and was also much more ritualised. This level of religious activity, however, tended to be practised among important families but generally it did not have a significance outwith the family circle. There were essentially two main aims to this familial form of religion. The first was to maintain a cordial relationship with the ancestors who were the source of identity, unity and power within the family. The second, which followed as a consequence of the first, was to obtain the ancestors’ blessing, approval and protection for the family. This communion between the past and the present, between the living and the dead demonstrates the innate social quality of

33 *ibid.*, Chapter 4.
34 Cf. Maillard 1985:91-105
the traditional religion and probably predates the migration period since it more simple in content but also widespread among all the savannah cultures.\textsuperscript{35}

Asonganyi, however, incorporated this familial form of religion into another of the traditional institutions known as \textit{Lefem} (the Gong Society). The term \textit{Lefem} referred to both the society and the sacred forest, a small copse close to the Fon’s palace, where the society held its meetings. Only the Fon, his chiefs, nobles and retainers were permitted to enter the \textit{Lefem}. Women, children and commoners were debarred on pain of death.\textsuperscript{36} The forest was a physical symbol of the political and spiritual power of the Fon and it was made more potent when the \textit{Lefem} society met within it. Its power was continually being augmented because witches, stillborn children, indeed anything untoward, would be buried there. Feasting and playing the sacred gongs (iron bells) was an important part of the \textit{Lefem} meetings but its principal concern was to discuss social and political matters, to judge cases and decide on punishment.\textsuperscript{37} An integral part of the meeting, however, was the offering of sacrifices to the Royal ancestors, carved figures of whom were brought to light.\textsuperscript{38} It was believed that the showing of these statues during the \textit{Lefem} rendered the ancestors present to the discussions. All the decisions arrived at, therefore, were seen as being an agreement also with the royal authority of the past.\textsuperscript{39} Once again, therefore, we can see that the social, political and religious are contained in one event. The incorporation of the

\textsuperscript{35} cf. Maillard 1985: 210-215
\textsuperscript{36} cf. \textit{ibid.}, p. 41
\textsuperscript{37} This society has its counterpart in all the grassland Fondoms. Among those around modern-day Bamenda, it is the \textit{Kwifor} society which decides affairs of state, judges cases and carries out punishments. What is unusual about \textit{Kwifor}, however, is that the Fon is not a member. The Fon may rule but he is accountable to the \textit{Kwifor} society which can even depose him if he is seen to be unjust. It is interesting that the pro-democracy movement which began in Cameroon in 1990 started in Bamenda which continues to be its heartland. The leader of the movement, Ni John Fru Ndi, is not only a committed Presbyterian and a member of \textit{Kwifor} himself, he is also one of a rare breed in African politics, namely, an honest man. One of the central ideas of his party is the notion that government officials and leaders, i.e. the modern ‘Fons’, must be accountable to the people.

\textsuperscript{38} Bangwa carving is unique and the subject of Brain and Pollock’s study (1971). The main centre of carving was at Asonganyi’s palace in Azì, Lebang though the art spread throughout the ‘Bangwa’ area. Many of these statues were taken by the Germans in the early part of the 20th century and most of them are now housed in a special collection in Berlin. The most famous piece, “The Bangwa Princess”, was bought from the German collection by the Franklin Museum of New York for 1.5 million dollars in 1989.

\textsuperscript{39} cf. Brain, 1971:84
ancestors into the affairs of state, however, was Asonganyi’s innovation and further affirmed his authority since it was only the royal ancestors who were present, not those of other chiefs or commoners. Any attempt to usurp the Fon’s authority, therefore, would involve taking on the spiritual powers which maintained the order of the universe. Lefem is a clear example not only of the integral connection between the social, political and religious but also of the way in which the religious and spiritual were drafted in to support the ruling authority and the social structures.

Asonganyi imported a number of other societies from neighbouring groups such as the Mbo and the Bayang. His ultimate aim would seem to have been to place everyone into one or other of these societies in order that each one knew his place and behaved accordingly. All these societies had a strong spiritual basis to them and, in emphasising the clear stratification of Lebang society, they were a reminder of the close connection between supernatural and temporal power. Asonganyi was famous for organising feasts at which the whole population would enjoy his generosity. However, all the various societies were expected to present their own dances or perform some ritual function during the occasion. The order in which these took place was strictly regulated and reflected the social hierarchy.

Large celebrations such as those held by Asonganyi were typical of the savannah Fondoms. While religious rituals did have some part to play during the proceedings, and social and political power was very much in evidence, the main purpose was to create a sense of unity among everyone. The Abin ceremony of the people of Bafut deserves mention as an example of a religious ritual promoting social unity. Once a year the entire population met to offer sacrifice at a waterfall near the Fon’s palace. The sacrifice, various foods and leaves, was seen as being acceptable to the ancestors if it was sucked into the whirlpool below the falls. This condition fulfilled, each person aired their complaints about

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40 I am grateful to my friend, Rev. Aaron Su, for his explanations of this ceremony and the role of Kwifor mentioned earlier.
all those with whom he or she was in disagreement. After three days of emotional fireworks everyone had to drink palm wine together as a sign of reconciliation. Another sacrifice was then made and if this was ‘accepted’ by the ancestors at the waterfall, then it was believed that peace reigned in Bafut. If it was not accepted, i.e. the offering floated round without being sucked down, then those still harbouring resentments were ordered to come forward and be truly reconciled.

These examples, I hope, demonstrate not only the link which existed between the religious and the socio-political but also the fact that much of the nature and function of the savannah religions was actually determined by the socio-political systems they operated in. Religion was a creation of society and its servant.

3.4 Religion as a Social Tool

If the Catholic Church wishes to further the process of inculturation among the peoples of the savannah societies of western Cameroon, then it must take account of their understanding of religion and what role they see it as having within the culture and society. There is a fundamental cultural assumption, which seems to be common to all these societies, that religion is an integral part of society and its structures and that one of its essential functions is to create and maintain social unity. The fact that religion was sometimes used to further the political aims of Fons such as Asonganyi does not compromise its capacity as a unifying social principle but actually serves to prove it. Religion unified the society of past, present and future. It unified the physical and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural. It was an expression of societies which believed in the ordered oneness of all things. This awareness of unity is the bedrock of all the savannah cultures and, it can be argued, of most of the cultures in sub-Saharan Africa. It is also an awareness of the divine since the oneness of God and the perception of him as the principle of unity, are characteristics which are ascribed to him by almost all the religions of the world. The greatness of God was recognised and praised in the savannah religious ceremonies and prayers but the notion of God as Provider and Helper was much more to the fore. This is understandable when one
considers the fact that these prayers and ceremonies were conducted in the midst of wars, migrations and threats from all sides. It was this social context, in many ways, which limited the relationship with and understanding of God from developing beyond what can be described as an economic level, i.e. I offer you sacrifices and You protect me and provide for me. People perhaps were too busy surviving to create more esoteric theologies. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that God, for the savannah peoples, was often remote. In the absence of a fuller relationship with him, it was natural that religion, the expression of individual and collective awareness of the goodness of unity, should more often be used as a social tool rather than as a source of inspiration for the social.

There are obvious similarities between what I have just described and the character of religious belief and practice among the Jewish people in the pre-Prophetic era. One has only to read some of the Psalms to see that many of them could have been written in the grasslands of Cameroon. The themes are familiar: a migrant people who have struggled to establish themselves as a nation, surrounded by foes and calling on God for help and protection. In many ways Israel’s problems began when, despite the prophet Samuel’s warnings, it decided to become like other nations and have its own king. The syncretism which typified the faith of the later kings of Judah betrays what is perhaps a persistent temptation for hierarchical societies: to use everything, including religion, as instruments for socio-political ambitions. The wrath which this provoked from prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Jeremiah was a doubled-edged sword. Firstly, the prophets’ called for a fundamental change in Israel’s relationship with Yahweh. That relationship demanded that God was not to be coerced, used or bribed but to be obeyed. To put it another way, Israel was to no longer have the attitude that it ‘owned’ God but that it was owned by him and had to carry out his will. Secondly, social and political structures must equally conform to God’s will and this would be seen most clearly when social justice permeated all levels of society.
Any comparison between the experience of the Jewish people and that of the savannah societies of Cameroon has its limits. Similarities exist but the two societies and their histories cannot be considered as identical. However, in the areas of evangelisation and inculturation, some of the same principles apply. The prophets’ proposal of a radical shift from society determining religion to society being determined by religion constitutes perhaps the core element of the process of inculturation of Christianity within the savannah societies. It is not surprising that the first missionaries and the first Christian communities met with the same fate as the prophets, i.e. rejection, for what they proposed threatened not only the traditional religion but the political structures it served. The function of religion in the savannah societies, particularly in its relationship to these socio-political structures, therefore, would be the battleground in the conflict between traditional society and missionary Christianity in the first half of the 20th century.
4. LEVELS OF INCULTURATION AMONG SAVANNAH CHRISTIANS

4.1 Evangelisation in Western Cameroon

Joseph Merrick, a Jamaican of African ancestry, was the first Christian missionary to begin evangelisation in Cameroon. In 1843 he crossed from Clarence on the island of Fernando Po to the mainland and soon established a mission at Douala and one at Bimbia. The organisation he represented, the London based Baptist Missionary Society, had established itself in Clarence in 1841. Merrick was followed to Douala two years later by Alfred Saker, an Englishman, who took over the running of the missions and was subsequently credited by white historians as being the first to evangelise Cameroon. Of the two, Merrick was much more effective in real missionary terms since he understood the people and related to them in ways that Saker, for all his great organisational skills, never could.

The work of the Baptist Missionary Society was taken over by the Swiss Basel Mission when the former came into conflict with the German colonial authorities because of the manner in which German trading companies were allowed to appropriate almost all the land belonging to the Bakweri people. This vast tract of land was turned into oil and rubber plantations.

Roman Catholic Missionaries, German Pallotine Fathers, arrived in 1890 and set up a number of missions, mostly along the coastal region. With the defeat of the Germans in Kamerun in 1915 by British and French forces, all German nationals, missionaries included, were interned either on Fernando Po or in Jamaica. In their twenty five years in Kamerun, the Pallotines had baptised 54,458 neophytes and, with their departure, they left behind 24,545

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41 Underhill, 1958:24
42 Cf. Eyongateh, 1974 : 76, 85
43 See Skolaster, 1925: 248-296
catechumens. The 1919 Trust Mandate of the League of Nations divided the territory into two parts which were to be administered separately by France and Britain. After a period of eight years without a priest, the responsibility of evangelising the British Cameroons was given to the London based Missionary Society of St. Joseph, better known as the Mill Hill Fathers, in 1922. They reopened the former German missions along the coast and, like the Pallotines, attempted to devote some attention to the enormous number of workers in plantations. It was the return of plantation workers to their villages in the hinterland that brought about the spread of Christianity in Cameroon, particularly in the grasslands from which many of these workers originated.

Following the extremely successful method of evangelising pioneered by Bishop Joseph Shanahan in Iboland, Nigeria, the Mill Hill Fathers opened primary schools at their main mission stations. From the 1940’s onwards, however, the Church’s education programme expanded significantly because of the British colonial authorities’ instruction that all teaching was to be carried out in English rather than in vernacular languages and that mission schools would be given grants-in-aid to finance them. This policy followed the recommendations of the Phelps-Stokes Commission (1922 & 1924) which had toured British colonies to look into the question of the provision of education for African peoples. It also coincided with an improvement in the hitherto difficult relationship between the British colonial government and the Roman Catholic Church in Cameroon and Nigeria during the late 1930’s. As a consequence of the schools, the number of baptised Catholic increased continually throughout the 1940’s, 50’s and 60’s.

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44 Mveng, 1990: 40
45 See Forristal 1990 and Ayande 1966:265, 291
46 See Ayande, 1966: 303. For the British, the Cameroons were regarded as a backwater of Nigeria and, in terms of colonial administration, was always poorly manned. As foreseen by Phelps-Stokes, the provision of education for indigenous peoples would produce desperately needed clerical workers both for the colonial administration and the plantations. Since the small number of colonial officers in the Cameroons had little time to supervise an education system, the British were very happy to hand over this responsibility to the Catholics and Presbyterians and to provide them with the necessary finance. See correspondence between Mgr. P. Rogan, Vicar Apostolic for Buea, and Sir Donald Cameron, Resident, Cameroon, from 1938 to 1939 (National Archives, Buea, File C/R/Vol. VIII and Roman Catholic Archives, Buea, File 1936-1940)
The Church also opened more secondary boarding schools during the 1960’s and 70’s and it was from these that an influential Catholic elite emerged.

The 1980’s and 90’s have seen a gradual expansion of the Church throughout anglophone Cameroon. Missionaries only form 30% of the clergy and within twenty years they will all have gone or be retired from active service. Roman Catholics now number 240,000, almost 25% of the anglophone population.

The catechetical work carried out among the plantation workers and those who attended mission schools formed the backbone of the Church’s programme of evangelisation during its one hundred years of existence in anglophone Cameroon. However, it is important to note that both the plantations and the schools were largely self contained entities which in many ways were removed from the societies and cultures around them. It was this context which made evangelisation possible and which paved the way for the first level of inculturation among the Christians of the western savannah.

4.2 The Plantation Experience and the First Level of Inculturation

In 1885, within a year of the establishment of the German Protectorate, German trading companies set up the first plantations on the fertile slopes of Mount Cameroon\textsuperscript{47}. Initially workers were either forcibly conscripted or ‘donated’ by chiefs as a way of paying taxes to the colonial administration. While the seizure of vast amounts of land had a devastating effect upon the local Bakweri, the workers brought from the savannah region and who constituted the bulk of the labour force did not adapt well to the coastal climate. The death rate among these men has been estimated at between 30 to 50\%\textsuperscript{48}. By 1910 the situation had improved but it was only after the First World War, when the plantations came under British control, that they became more attractive to those in search of financial gain.

\textsuperscript{47} Ardener 1961:83
\textsuperscript{48} Eyongateh 1974:85
For the young men of the savannah, most of whom were in their early twenties, the plantations were an quick way to amass enough money for bridewealth payments. If they stayed at home they could only expect to marry in their thirties and, as most of them had no great social status within their own societies, the plantations represented an opportunity of advancing themselves. The average length of stay was 6 years\(^{49}\) and by 1938 as many as 25,000 men were employed in the plantations. This would rise to 32,000 in 1953, the all-time peak\(^{50}\).

Even if a large number of these men tended to come from the savannah area, no one tribal group dominated the labour force as a whole\(^{51}\). In many ways the plantation workers developed their own culture and society. The common language was pidgin English. The economy was based on cash rather than bartering. Men maintained close ties with their own countrymen but there was a great deal of mixing with those of other tribal groups. Ardener, in fact, reports that 82.5% of men preferred to live in mixed (tribal) camps and work in mixed (tribal) squads\(^{52}\). My own informants\(^{53}\) confirm Ardener’s findings that there were less disputes, less competition, jealousy and witchcraft when camps and squads were mixed\(^{54}\). This was felt to be particularly true by the men from the hierarchical savannah societies and, although conditions were difficult, they often speak of life on the plantations as being more egalitarian and less restrictive socially. The plantations, therefore, catered for economic aspirations and offered a greater degree of social freedom.

As a place of evangelisation and conversion the plantations provided a unique opportunity. The strict social and political structure of the savannah kingdoms

\(^{49}\) Ardener et al, 1960: 47
\(^{50}\) ibid., pp. 3-5
\(^{51}\) Ardener 1961: 89
\(^{52}\) ibid., p. 101
\(^{53}\) Stanislaus Nkeng (late) worked in the plantations in the 1920’s and 30’s and Mathias Anu from 1946-1951.
\(^{54}\) Ardener 1961: pp. 101-104
would hardly have allowed any innovation which did not support the power of the Fons and their sub chiefs. They would immediately recognised the subversive quality of Christianity since it challenged some of the basic beliefs and practices which underpinned their authority and status. Later events were to bear this out. Almost all the men who worked on the plantations attended Christian religious services at some time during their stay in the camps. However, for most the motive was usually one of simple curiosity. During the periods 1931-39 and 1946-53, 37% of men attended Roman Catholic catechism classes at one time or another. 19% completed the course and were baptised. The remainder either abandoned the classes or were baptised elsewhere after they left the plantations.\footnote{These figures are very approximate but they perhaps give some idea of what was going on. I arrived at them by comparing statistics from Ardener’s studies of the plantations (1960 and 1961), British colonial records in Buea and the ‘Sacred Returns’ (annual statistics of sacramental life) of those parishes which served the plantations (Diocese of Buea archives). The number of baptisms could have been higher since Catholic priests, Presbyterian pastors and catechists often complained that they simply could not cope with the numbers.}

An examination of the question as to why these men converted to Christianity will, I believe, provide us with evidence of the initial stages of inculturation. It can be argued that by becoming involved in the European economic and industrial organisation which controlled the plantations, it was logical that workers embraced the European religion as well. This idea is based on the inextricable link which exists between economics, social organisation and religion in many African world views. Another idea, closely related to this, would suggest that enormous economic, social and military power must be backed, in an equal degree, by religious power. To put it in simpler terms, the white man’s great power comes from having a more powerful God. The fact that conversions among men of the savannah societies was proportionately higher than among other, less socially organised, groups would seem to give some support to these ideas. However, these explanations of conversion require a somewhat robotic or mercenary attitude on the part of those who became Christians. They suggest an over-structural understanding of religion and
humanity. Conversion is much more complex since it is an intensely human phenomenon.

It is perhaps useful at this point to mention acculturation, a term which is often confused with inculturation but which is a distinctly different sociological concept. Acculturation is the encounter between one culture and another, or the encounter between cultures. As we have seen earlier, this is perhaps the principal cause of social change. It can even be said that this dynamism is one of the principal characteristics of culture. The men working on the plantations in the post First World War period encountered some aspects of Western culture. These were mostly technological and economic. The majority of Cameroonian men rarely came into contact with their European managers. Although they were under a certain organisational domination as humble labourers, it would be stretching ideas to suggest that this constituted a form of cultural domination. The men were also free to go home at any time if they so desired. With Christianity, however, we do have a cultural encounter since it involved new ideas and new forms of behaviour. However, the process of acculturation taking place in the plantations was modified by two important factors. Firstly, in the encounter with European Christianity, men had a complete and individual freedom of choice. Secondly, the completeness and individuality of this freedom arose out of the fact that men were living in a context outwith their cultural setting. More will be said about this later, but it shows that the encounter between savannah culture and Christianity was in fact only an indirect one. Thirdly, most men who became Christians were not catechised directly by European priests, this work was done by catechists who were Cameroonian. For that reason it can perhaps be said that there was probably some form of ‘cultural filter’ in the whole process.

In his discussion about conversion, Horton criticises the over-structural approach to religion, mentioned earlier, which can be a common fault among

many sociologists and anthropologists\textsuperscript{57}. Although he does not use the term ‘acculturation’, the concept is contained in much of what he says about the process of conversion. We can see this when he suggests that for Christianity to take root in a given society it must often be accompanied by other external factors which are in the process of promoting social change\textsuperscript{58}. The conversions to Christianity which took place in the plantations were the first expression of a coincidental spread of both Christianity and a new socio-economic system in the Cameroons during the early 20th century. This phenomenon apparently confirms Horton’s claim, arrived at in similar circumstances, that a widening of economic relations promotes a deeper awareness of God as the Supreme Being and facilitates an increased relationship with Him to the detriment of more local ‘gods’ such as the ancestors\textsuperscript{59}. This association, even the perception of a causal relationship, between the spread of Christianity and social/economic development surfaces frequently in the conversations of Christians who converted during the colonial period. If we examine what they say in more detail we can see that the personal and social impact they often ascribe to Christianity has three dimensions.

The first is, as Horton observes, a greater awareness of and relationship with the Supreme God which has a side-effect of diminishing, even eliminating, the importance of the ancestors. The second, which is a consequence of the first, is that personal conduct is influenced, even determined by the relationship with the Divine. This is also accompanied by a corresponding increase of the sense of personal responsibility. All religious and social activity, therefore, serves the Supreme God. This dimension weakens the position of the Fon and the ancestors in the socio-religious equation. The third impact which the first Christians of the plantations often speak of is that Christianity opened their eyes not simply to the wider world, but also to a new and better way of living together with others. The plantations certainly provided a release from the socially restrictive atmosphere

\textsuperscript{58} See Horton 1971:102-107
of savannah society, particularly if you were a young man without a title, land or wives, but what is important to note here is the awareness that, within a Christian community, social relationships were not to be dominated by the fear of social, political and mystical power such as that wielded by the Fons. All were equal in the eyes of a God who demanded obedience to the law of love. Justice and social conduct, therefore, were to be regulated by an immutable code which had its origin outwith the human society. This shift in thinking represented an enormous break with the traditional system of religious ideas and practices which relied on the will and political interests of the Fon. It, therefore, constituted a fundamental change for the social role of religion in the savannah societies. In principle, religion was no longer to be determined by the socio-political system which it was expected to serve but, rather, the pattern of relationships which governed the order of society would themselves be determined by reference to a set of religious ideals which were independent of that social system. This about-turn, I would argue, was one of the vital elements in bringing about a first level of the inculturation of the gospel message among the first Christians who originated from the savannah cultures, i.e. that in terms of moral consciousness the relationship with the Christian God and the demands inherent to that relationship became the determining factor for social behaviour (and, therefore, society) and was the base line against which this would be judged. Although the product of this first level of inculturation was a sense of psychological and spiritual liberation, we have to bear in mind that its realisation was only possible in circumstances where individuals of that culture were no longer under the control of the ruling forces of savannah society. An increase in social freedom facilitated greater spiritual freedom which in turn provided the opportunity for spiritual discovery.

At this point, one might argue that the new Christians of the plantations had merely exchanged one set of rulers for another. By becoming Roman Catholics they had put themselves under the strict regime of the Catholic hierarchy who were represented locally by missionary priests. In 1921 there were only four priests working in the entire British Cameroons. Even when more missionaries
arrived later they were often assigned to setting up new missions further inland. The result, therefore, was that Christians in the plantations were often left to fend for themselves. A priest would perhaps say Mass in one or two of the plantation missions each Sunday and leave the running of the Christian community to a small committee of Christians who were headed by a catechist. These small bands of Christians scattered throughout the numerous camps maintained their own sense of ‘Church’ and regulated themselves. Ecclesiastical control, therefore, was minimal.

The minimal contact with European missionaries certainly ensured a lack of cultural domination in the process of acculturation but one wonders to what degree the Christians of the Cameroonian plantations were ‘orthodox’ in terms of Roman Catholicism. This, I doubt, can ever be measured accurately. Furthermore, the situation was complicated by another important factor in the evangelisation process, namely, the difficulty of communicating complex ideas from one culture to another. This often led to what Isichei describes as a *working misunderstanding* between European missionaries and their African converts\(^{60}\), i.e. both parties were aware that what the priest was *saying* was not necessarily the same as what converts *understood*. Human affairs are frequently riddled with such approximations and compromise. Looking at the plantations experience, I am inclined to believe that the low level of involvement of the ‘official’ Church is a necessary component in the initial stages of primary evangelisation\(^{61}\) since it allowed these first Christians the space and flexibility to come to terms with their new faith without it being completely alien. It perhaps allowed the Spirit to work

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\(^{60}\) Isichei, 1970: 214

\(^{61}\) This was the core idea of Vincent Donovan’s *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle to the Masai* (1978). While some of his proposals for missionary work are refreshing, his approach is minimalist in the extreme. According to Donovan, a missionary had no other task than to go and announce the basic facts about Jesus Christ and then leave the formation of ecclesial structures and liturgy to those whom he had ‘evangelised’. The tone of the first half of the book is distinctly arrogant. The second half recounts his own experience of working among the Masai. For anyone who knows Africa, his ideas are not only wooly but also show that he understood very little about the Masai. Essentially he mistook the hospitality and politeness of his Masai hosts as a thirst for the Gospel. The book was hailed as a milestone by those in the West who had never been involved in any missionary work. Its success inspired him, after *three years* of missionary work, to take up an appointment in an American university as its guru in missiology. His Masai ‘missions’ did not
undisturbed in the exchange of ideas between men of similar backgrounds and culture so that they were able to arrive at an understanding which, while open to the universal aspects of Catholicism, was seen as relevant to their own particular situation.

The sense of collective identity was an essential factor in the realisation of this first level of inculturation. The liberation from the social and spiritual fear which characterised savannah society constituted one of the main bonding factors among converts and this was maintained through the twice-daily prayer meetings. Men would meet for morning and evening prayer where further doctrine was taught and individual problems and disputes were discussed. Like any small group, the sharing and possession of ‘new’ knowledge, particularly where some form of ritual initiation was involved, strengthened the bond between members and created a unique sense of identity. However, the sense of belonging to something wider and more universal, the Catholic Church, was also an important part of this sense of identity even if the men had only a limited contact with it. The sheer strength and depth of faith which these first Christians possessed, combined with their profound knowledge and understanding of Catholic doctrine, is still legendary and an inspiration to Catholics in Cameroon today.

To summarise, therefore, the first level of inculturation saw a new relationship with the Supreme God. Religious belief and practice were a consequence of that relationship and, therefore, were no longer determined by the social and political interests of a ruling elite. Instead, social relations themselves were to be determined by reference to the demands of the relationship with God. The product of this new relationship was also a sense of psychological and spiritual liberation which was affirmed through an intensely collective experience. The sense of Christian identity which resulted from this, while limited by a lack of contact with European missionaries, was, nonetheless, aware of and open to the universal character of the Catholic Church.

survive his departure since the only factor which could keep them together was Donovan’s own enthusiasm.
4.3 Conflict, Schools and the Second Level of Inculturation

When the converts from the plantations returned to their villages, it was not long before small Christian communities sprang up all over the high savannah area. The story of how many of these came into being is a fascinating one but there is not the space available here to tell it. Despite the fact that there were many of them, there seems to have been very little communication between these groups. There were many reasons for this: the mountainous nature of the terrain, hostility between villages and kingdoms, but more often than not there was a lack of awareness that there actually were other groups. Up until the 1940’s those communities which were not near a main mission could only expect a visit from a priest perhaps every five or six months. As with the plantations, therefore, communities had to run their own affairs. However, while these communities bore a great similarity to those of the plantations, i.e. twice-daily prayer meetings, a great sense of solidarity, etc., it was not long before they came into conflict with the traditional authorities.

Christians refused to comply with or participate in a number of traditional practices, the principal of which were: taking part in oath swearing when witchcraft was the suspected cause of illness or death, operations on corpses to divine the cause of death, polygamy and becoming part of traditional societies. In a society which had a strong sense of morality, the behaviour of these Christians was seen as intolerable because it threatened the fundamental principles which held society together. Opinions hardened on both sides and Christians found themselves under constant suspicion and persecution. During the period between the defeat of the German colonial power in 1915 and the establishment of British rule in the early 1920’s the Fons reasserted their authority and control over their kingdoms. Christians suffered considerably as a consequence. Unlike the

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62 For example, Fontem Asonganyi burned down the mission and expelled anyone trying to proselytise in his area. In Shisong in Banso country several leading Christians were murdered. Many Christians from the grasslands fled to the coast where towns such as Victoria and Tiko were beginning to develop.
plantations where Christians had lived together, the Christians on the savannah lived with relatives who did not share their new found beliefs. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that many of these first Christians succumbed to family pressure and abandoned Christianity.

Although, at first glance, the growth rate in the membership of the Church seemed to be almost static during this period (1915-1922), my own investigations into Church records show that there was a steady flow of new catechumens. This suggests several interesting facts. The first is that the sudden and complete absence of foreign missionaries did not prevent new conversions. This shows that the essential work of evangelisation was in the hands of lay Cameroonians, usually catechists. Although there was a lack of official Church structures, communities did attract new members and did so despite persecution. This, I believe, shows that there was some degree of inculturation of the Christian faith. Conversations with surviving members of these communities suggests that it bore many of the same features as the first level of inculturation dealt with in the last section.

An important element which enabled these communities to survive during the 1915-1922 period was, I believe, the rigourous catechumenate which new converts had to undergo. How long these communities would have continued to survive or how ‘Catholic’ they would have remained is difficult to determine. The establishment of British rule and the return of missionaries in 1922 provided the with some relief. However, one tactic employed by the missionaries to safeguard communities was to have all the Christians living together in one place. Disagreements about religious practice still persisted but the main conflicts became political. Chiefs and catechists frequently clashed over questions of authority. The British, because of their policy of Indirect Rule, almost always took sides with the traditional authorities in any disputes between chiefs and Christians. There were many examples of catechists being
imprisoned\textsuperscript{64}, priests being fined or expelled from the country\textsuperscript{65} and ordinary Christians being flogged\textsuperscript{66} because all of them were seen as usurping traditional authority in one way or another. This tension between Christians and their local traditional authorities was matched at a higher level by the animosity between the missionaries and the British colonial administration\textsuperscript{67}. Christian communities, therefore, often felt themselves to be under a state of siege.

The 1940 agreement whereby the British colonial administration would provide finance for primary schools run by the Catholic Mission\textsuperscript{68} marked a significant step in the evangelisation process and in the development of the Church in the savannah area. A large number of schools were opened and although not compelled to do so, many children became Christians. From the parents’ point of view, the education of their children promised long term economic benefits when their children would be able to earn salaries and hold posts of responsibility. The relationship between missionaries, colonial administrators and traditional authorities, therefore, swiftly changed to one of close cooperation since the schools neatly served all their separate interests. However, by handing their children over to the mission and allowing them to become Christians, parents were effectively undermining many of their own traditional beliefs. Perhaps they were not aware of the full power of education or were prepared to compromise their beliefs in order to achieve economic power. Some of the Fons, at least, were conscious of the threat of mission schools to their culture and would only reluctantly accept Native Authority schools which

\begin{footnotes}
\item[63] This became a common practice throughout Africa during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Chinua Achebe refers to one of these Christian communities in his novel \textit{Things Fall Apart} (1958) and provides a good example of how they were regarded by the rest of society.
\item[64] \textit{See Rex versus Nkeng, Mamfe Court, November 1929, File Nc/c (Mf), Buea Archives (BA).}
\item[65] \textit{See Interference With Native Courts, File sd. 1928/4 and File sd. 1931/5 (BA); Complaints Against Roman Catholic Mission, File sd. 1930/1: Confidential Memorandum from D.O. Mamfe - A.E. Tweed to Resident, Buea, 25th September 1928: Complaint against Fr. Ham.}
\item[66] \textit{See Roman Catholic Mission, Bamenda, File sd. 1928/2 (BA).}
\item[67] See the 1925-34 correspondance between Mgr. Peter Rogan M.H.M., Vicar Apostolic and E. Arnett, Resident, Buea in which Rogan complained about the many examples of injustice shown against Christians by traditional rulers and the colonial authorities. (Roman Catholic Archives, Buea and Bambui, Bamenda)
\item[68] \textit{See footnote 46, p.33.}
\end{footnotes}
were run directly by the colonial administration and where religion was not taught.

As well as providing a means of mass evangelisation, the schools also provided the missionaries with another, equally important function, i.e. they were able to exert a greater control over Christian communities, their formation and their development. This was possible also because it coincided with an increase in the number of missionaries arriving in the grasslands during the post Second World War period when there was a boom in priestly and religious vocations throughout Europe. Priests supervised the running of the primary schools within their parishes where the headmasters and teachers were Cameroonian, often men who had become Christians on the plantations. The small number of secondary schools which the Catholic Mission opened were staffed entirely by priests who saw them as an opportunity to create a Catholic elite. The curriculum in both forms of schools aimed at providing a western-style education but the overall educational vision was one of full human development with religion and spirituality being accorded great importance. In many ways the schools bore great similarities to the plantation experience, for example, they operated outwith the control of the traditional social and political system. However, even if those teaching were largely Christians of the savannah culture, the spiritual and catechetical formation was much more formal and exact. It was not long before the mission schools produced people who would go on to become civil servants, doctors, lawyers, teachers, businessmen and politicians.

The fact that the introduction of schools made Christianity more acceptable in the eyes of traditional society was closely linked to the economic growth experienced in Cameroon during the post war period. People identified Christianity, education and the new economic system as part of a single phenomenon which had its origin in the Western world. That perception was correct in terms of political, economic and social power. One of the consequences of this was that the 1950’s saw the beginning of the end for the Fons and their ability to rigidly control the lives of their subjects. Their power
was gradually being handed over to the Cameroonian who had received a western-style education or who had become wealthy through commerce. These individuals effectively became the ‘Fons’ of the new society since they understood the new dispensation, were products of it and it was they who controlled the direction in which society was going. It came as no surprise that the political movement which led to the independence of West Cameroon (later united with the Republic of Cameroun) was exclusively in the hands of individuals who had been through mission schools. The government of West Cameroon, in fact, was made up predominantly of Christians from the savannah region. The religiosity and moral rectitude of these leaders was in sharp contrast to their counterparts in the government of the Republic of Cameroun, formerly the French Cameroun. The French colonisers seemed to have instilled their own traditional anti-Church sentiments in their successors as well as their penchant for accepting bribes. Even in their retirement and old age, those grassland Christians who passed through mission schools in the 1940’s and 50’s still exert a great moral influence on society today.

During the mid-twentieth century, therefore, Christianity became a social force through the lives of those who had been educated by the mission. The acceptance of the Church, gained through the schools and the increased presence of missionaries, permitted a more complete programme of spiritual and ecclesial formation. The development of a fuller Catholic identity, where Christians were much more conscious of their similarity to and links with the Christians in the rest of the Church throughout the world, corresponded to an expansion of social consciousness where people were much more aware of a national sense of identity as Cameroonians and of their place in the whole human community. The social and political stability experienced during the 1950’s, as well as the expectations of independence for Cameroon, had, I believe, a significant influence upon this whole sense of being open to a much wider spiritual and

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69 An attempt was made to incorporate them into the new political system through the creation of the House of Chiefs, an assembly modelled on the House of Lords in Britain. Its function was primarily consultative but it eventually disappeared when the two Cameroons were united in 1965. See Eyongateh 1974: 159, 164.
human reality. This period of the history of Cameroon, in fact, was characterised by a spirit of enthusiasm and idealism. New ideas, new visions of society were being called for and, in many ways, only Christians were able to meet this demand.

Here, I would suggest, we can see a second level of the inculturation of the Christian faith. At a point when the official Church was principally concerned with the establishment of its own structures and the formation of its members, individual Christians were making a considerable impact upon the society around them. Their activity was inspired by their relationship with Christ but that relationship was experienced in social terms within the Church. It was this which enabled them to have a social vision which sought to bring unity to the wider society and to promote the full development of the human spirit.

4.4 The Crisis of Savannah Society and the Death of a Culture

Among the older generation of the savannah area there is a great nostalgia for the colonial times and the period following independence. That longing for the past becomes all the more acute when they compare it with the state of things in savannah society in the 1990’s. Many of the generation which followed them do not seem to have their idealism and integrity.

Cameroon is typical of most sub-Saharan African states: corruption has permeated all levels of society, government is alienated from the people, administration is ineffective, infrastructures have broken down, proceeds from natural resources have been squandered or siphoned off into Swiss bank accounts, the economic crisis has fuelled tribalism, regionalism and all the other negative ‘isms’ which can possibly afflict a society\(^7\). The aim of the following is to show some of the ways in which savannah society has been affected by the social changes of the 1980’s and 90’s. Some of these observations are based on a

\(^7\) The best exposé of the situation I have read is to be found in chapter two of Robert Sandbrook’s *The Politics of Africa’s Recovery* (1989).
survey I carried out in May 1993 among 500 young people, all of whom were members of the Bangwa tribe, one of the western savannah groups.71

The power of traditional authority to control society has been almost completely eliminated. The Fons and chiefs have almost no jurisdiction over the people living within their chiefdoms. Most people take any problem they have to the police or civil administration. Despite the land they possess, Chiefs are now often among the poorest members of society economically. In the modern society, where education is a now prerequisite for employment and has to be paid for from one’s own pocket, having many children becomes an enormous financial burden. Consequently, any moral or social authority they may be able to exert is lessened by their diminished economic power.

Traditional religion is rarely practiced which is not unexpected when one considers the position of the traditional authorities whose power it was gave the religious system its meaning. The custom of keeping ancestral skulls has all but died out. Even traditional sacrifices are not as common as they once were, as is consulting the Ngambe (translated into English by the unfortunate term: ‘witchdoctor’). Young people, especially those who grow up in urban settings such as Bamenda, have only a vague idea about the old traditions. Even the local languages of the savannah, the repository of unique cultural ideas and identities, are losing the battle against Pidgin English. The old tradition, to all intents and purposes, is dying and with the next generation will have all but disappeared. The symbols remain, the dances are danced but they are quickly turning into folklore.

Although the extended family system is still strong, the character of the family has radically changed in the past twenty years.74 The rural exodus to the towns has taken the young and the able. They return every so often but their children

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71 A copy of the questionnaire is to be found in Appendix I. Some of the results are to be found in graphic form in Appendix II.

72 One chief informed me that the number of children he had was “about half a gross”.


74 See Lockhart 1994: 78.
less so. The strict code of sexual morality which typified savannah culture in the past has given way to extreme promiscuity. Many young girls become pregnant through casual encounters and many remain unmarried. In this context the AIDS virus is beginning to have a devastating effect. The three Catholic Mission hospitals, Shisong, Njinikom and Fontem, which serve the western savannah, report a dramatic increase in cases of the disease. In Shisong and Njinikom, which have 100 beds each, half of the patients are AIDS sufferers. In Fontem 12.5% of blood donors are discovered to be HIV positive, which the doctors there suggest that probably 25% of adults in their area are carrying the virus. In the long term this will have a radical effect not just upon the family but upon savannah society as a whole, far more than the Fulani horsemen of the last century.

Parents often lay the blame upon an unrealistic education system which expanded during the 80’s and 90’s. 90% of secondary school pupils attend schools which follow an academic curriculum while only 10% receive technical education which enables them to be builders, carpenters and electricians. In the midst of an economic crisis which shows no sign of abating but, rather, of deepening still further, most of these students end up unemployed and restless. Blame is difficult to apportion and at this point perhaps serves no purpose. The truth is more likely to be that all of us are to blame. If educational policy was unrealistic then so were our expectations.

It is to this context of almost social chaos that the Church must respond.

4.5 The Church as a Sign of Hope: Toward a Third Level of Inculturation

In the midst of the social and political upheaval of 1991-92, which saw much of Cameroon paralysed by disorder and the political opposition’s prolonged campaign of civil disobedience against the authoritarian regime of President Paul Biya, both sides became aware that the situation was spiralling out of control and
appealed to Cardinal Tumi to mediate in the dispute in order to restore some calm.

At a 1995 meeting of all the principals of government secondary schools of Cameroon one of them proposed that religion and morality become a compulsory subject for students and that the whole process should be supervised and run by the Catholic and Presbyterian Churches. In an impromptu vote, against the wishes of the Minister of National Education, 90% of those present accepted the proposal. The Minister rejected the idea.

Both these events, there are many others, reveal a growing awareness that the Christian churches perhaps represent the only stable institutions in Cameroon today which can offer some light in the current social and political morass. Not everyone has agreed with this. President Biya, ex-seminarian, ex-Roman Catholic, now a Rosicrucian, was highly critical of the Catholic hierarchy whom he saw as precipitating and aggravating the situation through a number of pastoral letters which they had published in recent years. Some of these laid the blame for the country’s woes fairly and squarely at the door to the presidential palace. Others were interpreted by Biya as openly provocative and led him to accuse the Bishops of meddling in politics which he believed that they had no right to do so. The broad mass of people in Cameroon, however, welcomed these pastoral letters and accepted that they were motivated by an evangelical sense of justice and a genuine desire to help the country. The hierarchy were seen not only as being impartial but as being the one body which was truly ‘national’ and undivided. The Catholic Bishops, however, are conscious that while they are compelled to speak out in the role of the conscience of the nation, they must be extremely cautious. It would be all too easy to accept the apple of temptation which plagued the Church in similar circumstances during the Middle Ages in Europe, namely, becoming the arbitrator in political power struggles. Their role

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75 See: Cameroon Tribune (the government controlled bi-weekly newspaper), Tuesday, 4th June 1991.
76 See: The Economic Crisis and its effects on Cameroon, Cameroon Bishops, 1990.
must always be what *Ecclesia in Africa* described as: ‘being the voice of the voiceless’ and a sign of unity and the love of God for their society.\(^78\)

The activity of the Catholic hierarchy of Cameroon presents what appears to be signs of a third level of inculturation which needs to be translated into the local situation throughout the country. This is when the Church becomes not only a social force which promotes social unity, justice, peace and an integral vision of human life but is itself a witness to these when there is a deep communion not only among the Bishops but among all the members of the Church. It is in that communion, where relationships conform to a trinitarian pattern, that Christ is able to make his salvific presence felt in human/social terms.

In some ways the task of the Church in the savannah area of western Cameroon is to recreate society and facilitate the emergence of a new culture without, at the same time, assuming social or political power over it. If we examine the Church in the western savannah as it is today, we can see some initial signs that the third level of inculturation is beginning to take place. Many Christians are as guilty as the rest of the members of society for the all-pervasive corruption but there is growing spirit of renewal. Nonetheless, there are still a great number of totally committed Christians who have maintained the dedication and personal integrity of the Christians of the past. Small communities, outstations, still run their own affairs and manage to survive despite the influence of materialism. However, it is with the recent emergence of small groups and associations within the Church that we begin to see some signs of a deeper communion and the ordinary level of the parish. The character of these groups is

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\(^{78}\) *EIA* 70, 98, 131-135. Archbishop Jean Zoa of Yaounde was criticised within Cameroon and by others abroad for his close association with Paul Biya who at one time was one of his students. He was attacked for this by his fellow bishops at the meeting of the Episcopal Conference of Cameroon in Bertoua in April 1991 and even reduced to tears. Zoa changed his position after this and became outspoken against the government when Archbishop Yves Plumy was assassinated. His ties with Biya were completely severed after the murder, probably by the security forces, of a number of priests and nuns of his diocese. Since the murder (almost surely by the secret police) of the Jesuit, Englebert Mveng, probably one of the greatest minds in the history of the Church in Cameroon, Jean Zoa has adopted an extremely hostile attitude towards Biya and his government. See *L’Effort Camerounais*, Mgr. Zoa’s sermon: ‘Notre pays est comme un homme tombé aux mains des bandits’ (Our country is like a man who fell among thieves), No. 48 (1045), 8th June 1996.
interesting because we see many aspects which recall factors which were integral to savannah culture. Even if savannah society is experiencing a deep crisis, the desire for social unity still remains a fundamental characteristic of the people of the grasslands. As has been noted, despite the social crisis, the family as an institution is still strong even if it has changed in some respects. The groups which have emerged in the savannah Church during the 90’s are becoming popular precisely because they satisfy the need to belong to a small family style group where social, religious and spiritual unity can be experienced. They perhaps perform the same function as the traditional societies of the past which grouped together people of a similar status, occupation or interest. In some ways there is much in common here with the rise of religious sects throughout Africa. However, where the sects often close in on themselves and become exclusive, the Catholic groups and associations tend to have to work together at times when there is a parochial or diocesan event. The groups also affirm at a local level that ‘multiculturalism’ not only respects particular needs but actually enriches the local Church as a whole.

I have deliberately refrained from dealing with the use of symbols and the ‘expressions’ of culture throughout since these are not the culture itself. As I mentioned in the introduction, the debate about inculturation too often - and wrongly in my opinion - focuses on these externals to the detriment of real issues. In the context of the savannah society, many of the old symbols and dances are used in the liturgy but those using them, particularly the young, have only a vague idea of their original significance. We cannot use dead symbols to resurrect a dead culture. One of the tasks facing the Church is to redefine the meaning of those symbols in the context of its search for communion. An expression of faith is only valid if it serves the objectives of that faith. For the

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79 For example: The St. Jude’s Society, The Fr. Tansy Society, Choir groups, Word of Life, Focolare, Maranatha, Charismatic Renewal, the Third Order of St. Francis, Christian Family Movement, New Families. While some have been imported from the Church in the West, they are distinctly ‘African’ in the way they operate.

80 Problems do arise. The leader of Maranatha, a priest, was recently hauled over the coals because his group was seen to be excluding itself from the life of the diocese and adopting attitudes which undermined communion with the other members of the Church.
The Church of the savannah society today that means that symbols, both old and new, must affirm the relationships of love, the pattern of divine culture and the communion of the Church. They must not become so exclusive as to impair the Church’s openness towards those belonging to the host society, to those of other neighbouring societies and to the universality of the Church. The African Church’s use of ancient symbols, therefore, must beware of freezing culture and turning it into folklore. There is, I feel, too much looking to the past. That is understandable when one considers the damage done to culture by the colonial powers\textsuperscript{81}. The Church in Africa has to create new symbols and new expressions which are equally ‘African’. However, it must also be careful that ‘inculturated liturgies’ do not affirm tribal differences and alienate others\textsuperscript{82} at a time when the negative effects of tribalism are evident throughout the continent. It cannot add liturgical insult to social injury.

The small groups and associations, therefore, perhaps show signs of the coming of a third level of inculturation in the Church in the western savannah where the Church will become a social force which makes its contribution to the healing of society. Perhaps what we are seeing is a spiritual return to an ecclesial form of village life, where each village is in communion with the others throughout the Church and where the Spirit is can pour out his gifts in a more manageable social context.

\textsuperscript{81} It is not surprising that francophone Catholic theologians are the most vociferous in their demand for inculturation and a relaxing of Rome’s strict control of Church life. The French and Belgians actively sought to demean and destroy traditional culture in their African colonies. One has only to read Jean-Marc Ela’s \textit{African Cry}, and \textit{My Faith as an African} to get some idea of the smouldering resentment in the hearts of francophone writers.

\textsuperscript{82} This, unfortunately, is a common complaint from those who travel out with their own areas. The reservations I express here do not come from a desire to affirm ‘Roman-ness’ over ‘African-ness’ - I enjoy our liturgies immensely. Our concern must primarily be charity and communion.
5. CONCLUSIONS

From what has been said, we can see that inculturation has, in fact, taken place among the Christians who belong to the savannah societies of western Cameroon well before the Synod of African Bishops of 1994. This inculturation has involved the transformation of the role of religion in savannah culture whereby social relations are to be determined by the relationship with the Supreme God rather than by the socio-political interests of ruling figures such as the Fons and their chiefs.

Like culture and society, we have seen that inculturation is a dynamic process and that this dynamism originates not simply from the changes which are forever part of human relations and human society, although they too can play a part in creating favourable conditions for inculturation. Primarily, the fundamental change in the character of relationships between the first savannah Christians was caused by the fact that, under the guidance of the Spirit, they were being transformed in such a way that they conformed to the pattern of relationships existing within the Trinity.

In sharing in this divine form of culture, they experienced not only social and spiritual liberation but also a deep sense of unity. That unity, while limited among themselves because of local circumstances, was open to the whole Christian community. All this can be described as a realisation of a first level of inculturation of the Christian faith.

The more favourable conditions of the post Second World War saw the acceptance of Christianity by the members of traditional savannah society and the establishment of closer links with the rest of the Catholic Church. The development of a deeper communion with the rest of the Church produced a greater sense of identity which, in turn, gave individual Christians a social and political vision with which they were able to affect society in a positive way.
Christianity, therefore, was a social force which was able to promote full human development. This was seen as a second level of the inculturation of Christianity.

In the midst of the enormous social changes taking place in savannah society, most of which were negative, the Catholic Church has become not just the object of appeals for practical social, moral and political assistance, but has, at times, witnessed to the divine unity by the example of these within its own life. While Christians have not lived up fully to the demands required by their faith and have their own share of blame for the social difficulties being experienced in Cameroon at the present, there are signs that a striving for unity - patterned on the Trinity and evident in the flowering of small ecclesial groups and communities - is beginning to create a new culture which can be a sign and source of hope for the rest of society. This, perhaps, is evidence that a third level of inculturation is in the process of being realised.
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Catechist, former plantation worker (deceased)

Mbe Forbinake
Christian, former plantation worker, polygamist

Michael Nkeze
Christian, teacher and politician

Chief Fotabongeleke
Chief, Christian and lawyer
Appendix I

Survey Results
**Marriage Patterns among Bangwa Fathers**

- Polygamous: 40%
- Monogamous: 60%

**Marriage Patterns among Educated Professional Bangwa Men**

- Polygamous: 28%
- Monogamous: 72%

**Marriage Patterns among Rural Bangwa Peasant Men**

- Polygamous: 47%
- Monogamous: 53%

**Marriage Patterns among Bangwa Grandfathers**

- Polygamous: 68%
- Monogamous: 32%
Marriage Types among Rural Bangwa

- Church: 31%
- Unmarried: 5%
- Divorced: 2%
- Traditional: 62%

Marriage Types among Urban Bangwa

- Church: 45%
- Unmarried: 3%
- Divorced: 7%
- Traditional: 45%

Marriage Types among Rural Bangwa Peasants

- Church: 23%
- Unmarried: 5%
- Divorced: 3%
- Traditional: 69%

Marriage Types among Urban Bangwa Educated Professionals

- Church: 51%
- Unmarried: 4%
- Traditional: 35%
- Divorced: 10%
Figs. 9-12

Rural Bangwa Students

Non-Christian
14%

Christian
86%

Urban Bangwa Students

Non-Christian
8%

Christian
92%

Rural Bangwa Students of Peasant Parents

Non-Christian
29%

Christian
71%

Urban Bangwa Students of Educated Professional Parents

Non-Christian
5%

Christian
95%
Participation in a Traditional Sacrifice
Bangwa Students of Peasant Parents

- Participated: 59%
- Not Participated: 41%

Participation in Traditional Sacrifice
Bangwa Students of Educated Professional Parents

- Participated: 33%
- Not Participated: 67%

Have you seen an ancestors' skull?
Bangwa Students of Peasant Parents

- Have seen: 37%
- Have not seen: 63%

Have you seen an ancestor's skull?
Bangwa Students of Educated Professional Parents

- Have seen: 37%
- Have not seen: 63%
How well do you know Bangwa Tradition?
Bangwa Students of Peasant Parents

- Very Little: 25%
- A bit: 26%
- Well: 14%
- Very Well: 28%
- Nothing: 7%

How well do you know Bangwa Tradition?
Bangwa Students of Educated Professional Parents

- Very Little: 30%
- A bit: 21%
- Well: 26%
- Very Well: 11%
- Nothing: 12%

How well do you know the Bangwa language?
Bangwa Students of Peasant Parents

- Very Little: 11%
- A Bit: 10%
- Nothing: 1%
- Very Well: 70%

How well do you know the Bangwa language?
Bangwa Students of Educated Professional Parents

- Very Little: 31%
- A bit: 11%
- Well: 14%
- Very Well: 39%
- Nothing: 5%