

# Constraints and Prospects of Inculturation in Kenya

**Bernard Gechiko Nyabwari**

Lecturer and registered PhD candidate Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kenyatta University- Kenya

**Michael T. Katola, PhD**

Senior lecturer Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kenyatta University – Kenya

DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v4-i2/647 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v4-i2/647>

## Abstract

*The inculturation process in Kenya has been challenged by internal and external sources. Internally the process has been destabilized by the Kenyan socio-religio cultural structures which are patriarchal: men have been the only proponents of the inculturation progression. Issues of ethnocentrism, discrimination and prejudice have affected the process by locking the ministers in their tribal cocoons; a situation which has been of late been fueled by political activists and some religious leaders have explicitly expressed their support of a Christianization phenomena have immensely affected the inculturation process in Kenya. In the event of the Kenyan people accepting the western Christianity wholesomely, they forget and abandon their cultural identities. A number of westerners view the Kenyan culture as empty, pagan and primitive without acknowledging their morality and relations to the Deity before the inception of Western Christianity. Communication technologies, computerized systems and swift currents of economy have also affected the inculturation process in Kenya. The process of inculturation has been challenged in all these aspects but it has been able to survive because it is a heavenly initiative that people may receive the Gospel message in their native culture, tongue, art, language, syntax and form. The study borrows Nasimiyu's (1986) Vatican II conceptual framework. Data were collected from priests, church members and leaders from both protestant and catholic churches in Kenya.*

**KEY WORDS** : Inculturation, Patriarchy, Globalization, Ethnocentrism, Prejudice

## 1.1 Introduction

The Gospel according to Jesus' great commission to the disciples in Matthew 28:19-21 is to be preached to all people in the world in their socio-religio-cultural backgrounds. This implies the relevance of inculturation. In Christian evangelization, inculturation is central in multicultural communities in the world. Inculturation as Waliggo (1986:12) explains is the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and His message of salvation understood by people of every culture, locality and time. By implication inculturation is the reformulation of Christian life and doctrine into the very thought-pattern of each people. The reformulation of Christian life and doctrine also entails dialogue and assimilation which can help the people to be truly Christians

and authentically local (John Paul II, 1980:222). This may explain why Dube (2002:57) and Arbuckle (1988:511) observe that inculturation is the conviction that Christ and His Good News are ever dynamic and challenging to all times and cultures as they become better understood and lived by each people. In view of this inculturation can be considered as a continuous endeavor to make Christianity truly 'feel at home' in the cultures of each people.

Kenya has forty two ethnic groups each with its social, religious and cultural uniqueness. In all these communities, Christianity has an obligation of taking the gospel message to all of them as a response to Jesus' Great Commission to the disciples, "Go Ye Therefore..." For Christianity to be accepted in these diversified cultural populations, the Christian message needs to be communicated through specific thought forms, syntax, and symbols that are familiar in these communities as a way of making the locals feel as if Christ is talking to them in their own language and cultural background. Christianity has to employ incarnation and inspiration of the gospel to facilitate penetration through all these communities. Christian messengers likewise are challenged to develop and embrace "the willingness to contextualize the gospel following in the footsteps of Christ." Nasimiyu (1986: vii).

Evangelists in Kenya are challenged to teach the truth of the Gospel which was written in different cultural, geographical and historical backgrounds to fit the local context without shifting or compromising the ideals of God. In contextualizing the Gospel messages, evangelists and ministers who serve beyond their cultural settings find it hard to learn the cultures of their congregations, the culture of the Bible and their own cultures. Nasimiyu (1986: vii) notes that the challenges lie in the interaction among the cultures. She also asserts that another question arises from the relationship of the converts in their own cultures. "How are the converts to relate to their culture? Is there an integration of their faith and their culture?"

This paper mainly aims at exploring challenges of the process of inculturation and religious life in Kenya. It examines the dynamics of inculturation experienced by men and women in the course of making Christianity a way of life among the Kenyan people in the cultural beauties. It explores the importance of cultivating consciousness on those glued to Western Christian mentality by decolonizing their philosophies that they may be helped to define the evolving expression of faith. Shorter (1998:104). The paper will also revolutionize the Kenyan people to the acceptance of the reality that the gospel ministry is not gender segregative. It incorporates both men and women in its course. Therefore, the paper challenges Kenyans to understand of the role of women and men in the gospel ministry, the models of social relationships while incarnating the deep things of God and provide solutions to different problems, and challenges of inculturation of religious life.

This work borrows the conceptual framework constructed by Nasimiyu (1986) in Vatican II: The Problem of Inculturation. It tries to uncover the historical background of inculturation as systematized by Nasimiyu and relate it to the challenges of the process in the Kenyan background.

### **1.2 Biblical Justification for Inculturation**

Inculturation is a process which is as old as the people of God and it is an ongoing process. It is a process that fits all contemporary theologies in all cultural, religious and ethnic bases. Inculturation in other words is a process which presents the Gospel message in a manner that the Word becomes companionable and agreeable with human ecological realities of the people.

The rationale on which the argument is based is that the inculturation process is anchored in both the New and Old Testaments. Citing an example of inculturation in the Old Testament, Nasimiya (1986) asserts that the Jewish adaptation of circumcision from the Egyptians became a symbol of a covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham. (Genesis 17:9-14)

God commanded Abraham to use circumcision, as a sign of his covenant; and in obedience to this order, the patriarch, at ninety-nine years of age, was circumcised, as also his son Ishmael, and all the male of his household, (Gen 17:10-12). God repeated the precept to Moses, and ordered that all who intended to partake of the paschal sacrifice should receive circumcision; and that this rite should be performed on children on the eighth day after their birth. (Exodus 12:44; Leviticus 12:3; John 7:22). The Jews have always been very exact in observing this ceremony, and it appears that they did not neglect it when in Egypt, (Josh 5:1-9) in that event of circumcision we learn the inculturation process in Old Testament which finds its application in the New Testament as well.

All the other nations sprung from Abraham besides the Hebrews, as the Ishmaelites and the Arabians also retained the practice of circumcision. At the present day it is an essential rite of the Islamic religion, and though not enjoined in the Qur'an it prevails wherever this religion is found. It is also practised in some form among the Abyssinians, and various ethnic groups of Africa, as it was by the ancient Egyptians. But there is no proof that it was practiced upon infants, or became a general, national, or religious custom, before God enjoined it upon Abraham.

The Jews despised any uncircumcised adult and the greatest offence they could receive was to be called "uncircumcised". Paul frequently mentions the Gentiles under this term (Rom 2:26), in opposition to the Jews, whom he refers as the circumcision. .

Disputes as to the observances of this rite by the converts from heathenism to Christianity occasioned much trouble in the early church, (Acts 15:1-41); and it was long before it was well understood that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature," (Gal 5:2, 3; 6:15). The true circumcision is that of the heart; and those "uncircumcised in heart and ears," are those who did not obey the law of God nor embrace the gospel of Christ.

In the New Testament inculturation can be exemplified in the incarnated humanity of Jesus Christ. Magea (1975) and Waligo (1986), use the incarnation of Jesus Christ as synonymous to inculturation. Their ideas are supported by the gospel of (John 3:16) because the word of God became incarnate to propagate the Good News of salvation to the entire human populace.

The term inculturation was popularized by the Encyclical Redemptio Missionis of Pope John Paul II (1990) but predates that encyclical. The inculturation is traced in St. Paul's speech to the Greeks at the Aeropagus of the Athens (Acts 17:22-33). The concept of inculturation arose when Latin was made a quasi sacred language, when translation of the Bible in the vernacular languages was condemned and when the customary venerations of the ancestors was condemned. This paper will identify the displacement of the idea of God among the Kenyan people. The paper will also try to harmonize the Western and Kenyan forms of Christianity.

Montfort (1998) gives a brief history of the sixteenth century evangelization of the American Indian. He also discusses inculturation and the missionary work under Christological criterion, ecclesiological criterion and anthropological criterion. Challenges of inculturation on the concepts of God in the Kenyan traditional faith will reveal the History of inculturation with

particular reference to the concept of God and the Euro-American concept of God. The paper reveals how the church profits from the treasures buried within the diverse Kenyan cultures.

Through the inculturation process the Gospel is evangelized to people in their cultural plurality. As such, the message becomes edified and given deeper interpretation. In fact the mutual interaction between the gospel and people's cultural identities are both enriched. In this way, the affected group feel incorporated and accepted in their cultural and moral values which are dictated by their historical, geographical, social, religious and economical backgrounds.

Any analysis of cultural systems provides a basis for examination of the concept of inculturation. Ideology, religion, commonsense and art as four major cultural systems, which are historically institutionalized systems of importance. Every one of these interacting systems has its own theology, even if it may not be expressed, and each functions to support social integration. The analysis suggest that inculturation should not be confined to a compartmentalized sphere, but should affect all systems of social meaning.

### **1.3 The Evolution of Inculturation**

Inculturation as a process has gone through many phases and in all these phases the principal idea has been to have an integrated cultural participation in matters related to Christianity and morality as portrayed in Biblical concepts. Magesa (2004: 70) adds that history reveals that before the introduction of the term inculturation as developed by the Catholic Church and contextualization by the Protestant churches; there were other terms used which we will try to explore in this paper. Tgis is what Nasimiyu (1986) had in mind when she discusses terms like accommodation, adaptation and indigenization. These terms are important in any discourse on inculturation theology.

In this paper the historical evolution of inculturation in the transition period 1900 – 1963, is examined. These years help us to comprehend the church's theological, social, spiritual and philosophical development in its attempts to make the gospel clearly understood by people of all cultures.

During the transition period 1900 – 1963, Nasimiyu (1986: 97) argues that the western European Symbols, Gestures, Art, Music and Latin language were viewed as universal. Drego (1986: 516) supports Nasimiyu's arguments by illuminating that during the Transition Period every European act of genuflection was perceived as sacrament, Gothic spire was a special indication of the parish church, Gregorian chant was the finest expression of the liturgical song, the Anglo-Saxon face of Christ or an Italian Madonna were the most evocative symbols of Christian piety. Any other symbols and cultures were regarded as empty, pagan, irreligious and inferior.

In spite of African cultures being considered irreligious and pagan in the transition period, Shorter (1998) opines that Christianity however to spread in Africa up to 1920s when a new world consciousness began to emerge. Western schools began to discover and appreciate the rich heritage of world cultures and religions as were revealed in the sociology and anthropology studies. The 1920s new understanding of the rich heritage of world cultures led to gradual initiation of converts into the mysteries of faith and the sacramental cult which made Africans participate in Christianity in the local people's rituals, customs, cultures, symbols, myths, traditions, music, singing and dance. (Drago 1981: 517)

Adaptation slowly evolved into indigenization which involved removing structures of foreign authority and replacing them with local personnel thus creating a local church which identifies

itself with what is typical to the religious realms. This led to the usage of the term indigenization; a term which later scholars found inadequate. It communicated the change of person leaving out the concepts of the cultural inclusion in the evangelization and Biblical hermeneutics.

During the Vatican Council II, the term accommodation was introduced to be used interchangeably with adaptation to mean the “naturalization of the local churches” or the principal of cultural relevance. Accommodation encompassed accepting the receiver of the Gospel message according to the receiver’s capacities which are limited by time, place, state of development and cultural background.

The Post-Councilor period has the contemporary theologians of catholic and protestant backgrounds. The protestant theologians after doing their studies on the term “Indigenization” came up with an argument that it never fitted the usage it was given by the catholic theologians. They maintained that the term was metaphor which did not apply well with the evangelization process. During the International Conference of World Evangelism in Lausanne in 1974 Kato Byang (1975:47-48) introduced the term contextualization which actually in this paper has the same translation and application with the inculturation term and indigenization as maintained by the catholic theologians to date.

#### **1.4 Inculturation and Globalization: A Challenge in Kenya**

Cultural, moral and religious values in Kenya and other parts of Africa have been meddled with by the globalization phenomena, a condition which poses a solemn confront to the inculturation process. This is so because the Western mannerisms and religious philosophies which actually are a hindrance to inculturation are imported and socialized locally, criminalizing local cultures and religious performances.

Discussing globalization and its effects upon local cultures, Tab (2008) argues that the emergence of a global society in which economic, political, environmental and cultural arts in one part of the world quickly come to possess significance in another part of the world, has an immense negative influence on the inculturation process. The advancing communication, transportation and information transmission technologies have great impact on culture and people’s religious inclinations.

The arbitrators of inculturation who are the ministers of the Word and evangelizers are equally not left aside in this globalization quandary. Kenya is a third world country that seeks financial aid from the Western world. Ministers possessing the Kenyan aid-seeking mentality, likewise seek financial support from the Western countries. Those countries give the financial support required but they dictate on how the church should run the religious cultures to be tagged on. This aspect of aid acquiring with dictated way of church created cultures, challenges inculturation and “creates African Western Christians”.

Globalization tends to convey cultures of other people across the world through items commonly used in everyday life like the clothes we wear, the food we eat, music, dance and language. These items keep changing more often than not making people live as citizens of a single nation but culturally, materially, religiously and even spiritually engaged with other people in other parts of the world. Polity, politics and politicking philosophies shared globally have created a situation which affects the church structure on the other side, therefore the inculturation process.

The Globalization phenomena tend to “create cultures on other cultures” Magesa (2004: 15) which confuse the application of the Bible hermeneutics in diverse localities. In Kenya, foreign cultures have both negative and positive aspects. On the negative, it facilitates the spread of diseases, drug and women trafficking, uncontrolled immigration among others. These negative aspects affect the inculturation especially when they either infect or affect the church members and proponents of inculturation.

Mimicked sermons and pulpit drama has undermined the inculturation process in Kenya. The language used, the songs done, the clothes worn by ministers, the sacraments and the liturgy are imitations of Western world. Preachers want to sound westernized as if they do not know their local language. They also ignore their local attire and continue wearing the Roman imperial attire that was adapted by the church during the Constantine era. In most churches, women have continued to play supportive roles that are never part of the decision making body of the church. Local songs performed in the local language are perceived as boring and unspiritual by some ministers. The ministers ape cultures and preachers of the western milieu sacrificing their own Kenyan cultures. In the event of the ministers and church members sharing knowledge, technologies, investments, resources and ethical values with other parts of the world, it makes people forget their own culture and values which are avenues to the success of the inculturation process.

### **1.5 Inculturation, Patriarchy and Women**

Most Kenyan communities comprise of social systems and structures in which men dominate. Men are regarded as authority within the family and society hence power and possessions are passed on from father to son. These patriarchal societies consider women as part of the property, owned and acquired by men – even those men who are mentally challenged.

The Bible and History records a mammoth of eminent women with gifted hands and skills that saved men and the world from the face of humiliation. The Bible in the New and Old Testaments has a variety of women appointed by God to hold various offices that equally men held. They include Deborah Hannah and Mary among others. These women in the Bible serve the best rationale of disapproving the Kenyan patriarchal systems which hinder women’s participation in the inculturation process.

Discussing issues in Christianity, patriarchy and abuse of religious freedom, Brown and Parker (1989: 13) have discussed on the condition of humanity before and after the original fall of Adam and Eve. These scholars argue that both man and woman participated in the fall and both needed a savior. They argue that patriarchy is unjustifiable and that women should participate equally with men in the church and in the society. The inculturation process will be effective if the Kenyan people will ignore the cultural view on women by according them the value they deserve.

Reflecting on the Western Religious Tradition and Violence against Women in the Home, Reuther (1989: 31) notes that “Domestic violence against women – wife battering or beating – is rooted in and is the logical conclusion of basic patriarchal assumptions about women’s subordinate status.” She adds that Christianity borrowed Aristotle’s biology to legitimate their contention that women were ‘misbegotten males’.

Reuther illuminates that infanticide was routinely practiced against girl child in all ages, including the middle ages. Although the church opposed all infanticide, it justified the killing of

daughters suspected of sexual improprieties. It seems as if the church was impotent to act against the killing of girl children.

During the Middle Ages, women's religious orders were at times the only prospects for education and autonomous leadership roles for women in society. If a woman chose a religious vocation, the church would defend her against all the demands of her family that she gets married. Hence, the church offered women protection from the power of the patriarchal family.

During the Age of Faith and the Renaissance, most customary and town laws gave husbands the right to beat their wives, although it was usually said that they should do so 'reasonably' or 'moderately'. Similarly, many of the methods of investigating witchcraft put women in a no-win situation. Women were subjected to torture. If they refused to confess, it was assumed that they were witches, since a woman's inferior physical nature would not allow her to withstand torture unless she was receiving help from the devil. Women were tied and thrown in ponds. If they floated, they were convicted of witchcraft, but if they sank, they were exonerated, since it was believed that water would expel a witch. Either way, they were unlikely to survive the test. From these examples we note 'that historical Christianity defined women as inferior and subordinate to men. These images justified almost limitless violence against them whenever they crossed the male will at home or in society.

The assumption of patriarchal society is that when women are victims of either verbal abuse or physical violence, ranging from beating to rape, they themselves are responsible for it. They have 'asked for it' and therefore can receive no sympathy, compensation, or restraint of their violators, but only insult added to injury." Reuther (1989: 38).

The church also tried to control women's reproductive power. Although effective, safe herbal contraceptives were available, patriarchal ideology decreed that women should not use them and should accept their pregnancies as "God's will". The position of the protestant church is different and they accept artificial contraceptive as God's gift to humanity. The church even tried to control women's sexuality. Canon law and moral theology defined her sexuality as the 'debt of her body' which she owes her husband in the marriage contract. She is bound to serve him sexually, on demand, no matter what her own physical disposition might be.

Since many reactionaries have resurrected the myth of women's inferiority based on their interpretation of the Bible, we must have an alternate way of interpreting scripture in an African woman theologian way which appreciates life, protects and nurtures it. The African woman is also assertive, creative and her view point should be taken seriously and incorporated in the whole process of inculturation.

### **1.6 Inculturation in the Face of Ethnicity and Prejudice**

The process of inculturation in Kenya has been hindered by ethnocentrism, discrimination and prejudice. These three factors were fuelled in Kenya presumably after the disputed presidential elections of 2007. Ethnic animosity climaxed in the event of mass killings and evictions of innocent Kenyans in various parts of the country. With those traumatic experiences, still Kenyans identify churches on tribal bases, a condition which undermines true Christianity especially when evangelizers and ministers identify themselves with their ethnic cocoons.

An ethnic group consists of those who share a unique social or cultural heritage that is passed from generation to generation. The idea of ethnicity is rather multidimensional as it includes

aspects such as race, origin or ancestry, identity, language and religion. It may also include more subtle magnitudes such as culture, the arts, customs and beliefs and even practices such as dress and food preparation. The major role that the church in the process of inculturation in Kenya has is to liberate Kenyans and make them view each other as fellow citizens in a larger national shell. It should make Kenyans practice the words in the Kenyan national anthem 'justice be our shield and defender, may we dwell in unity peace and liberty, plenty be found within our boarders'. Ethnocentrism is cancerous and can kill a nation gradually. This is a social ailment that the church should strife to eliminate from the members of the public. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one's own culture and to downgrade all the groups outside one's own culture. Bobo and Hutchings (1996: 1951) assert that the origin of ethnic stratification lies in the individual's desperations of ethnic prejudice which relates to the theory of ethnocentricism.

Prejudice is an opinion usually an unfavorable one, based on insufficient understanding, irrational feelings or inaccurate stereotypes. Prejudice is characterized by an individual or a community's irrational dislike of someone depicted on unfounded hatred, fear, or mistrust of a person or group, especially one of a particular religion ethnicity nationality, sexual preference or social status. This malpractice results into unjustified hostile attitude and treatment of people based on their race or even by judging someone before even knowing the person.

### **1.7 Solution to the Inculturation Challenges in Kenya**

Inculturation is a process that needs support and participation by Kenyans of all social strata. Therefore it should be localized to the members of the Kenyan public to ensure that it penetrates all ethno theologies without any resistance or influence by external imported cultures which criminalize, paganize, diminish and inferiorize the Kenyan local cultures.

Kenya is one of the countries with the highest registration of both independent and mainline churches with a total Christian percentage of more than eighty percent of the total population. With these large numbers supporting the strength of Christianity in Kenya, all Christians should indulge in the participation of inculturation process which seeks to respect and treasure the cultural values integrated with Christianity.

Sexual chauvinism and ethno prejudice is one of the diseases that the Kenyan Christian community should seek to find long lasting solutions to. Inculturation process will pick up well when the entire population will exhaust the god-given faculties – mental, physical, and social in the evangelization process. Kenyans should accept the reality that, no one chooses an ethnic group where to be born and raised. There is no superiority or inferiority tagged on an ethnic community where one is fathered or mothered. Therefore it will be prudent for every participant in this process to accept one another in their social, religious, sexual, academic, ethnic, tribal and denominational backgrounds.

The contemporary Catholic and Protestant theologians in Kenya should strife to theologize religio-cultural practices and preach to Kenyans sermons drawn from the Bible with incarnated forms that can be understood in local contexts without contravening the concepts of truth as contained in the Bible. They should as well reveal the Old and New Testaments Biblical support of the inculturation process by discussing some cultures of some Bible characters and how they were incarnated, treasured and valued while the Gospel message was shared among them.

Denominational theological strife, contention and discord are not Christian attributes. It is needless to have protestant and catholic divides based on theological and doctrinal variances.



Each denomination should respect other denominations and develop a goal of Christianizing Kenyans and not 'denominizing' Kenyans.

It is factual that the world is in a continuous flux in its social, economic, religious, technological, and academic realms. Accepting this reality should not compromise the sinning of the beauty of the cultures of our fore fathers and others which are rich in moral-ethical values. Globalization as a tool that connects humanity should only create awareness of how people live in other parts of the world but not to interfere with the local cultures by displacing them with detrimental replacements of imported cultures which strain the local humanity.

Finally, the church should be at the fore front in the battle ring cot of fighting the ethnic monster which is tearing Kenya apart. Inculturation process will not succeed if ethnocentrism, discrimination, sexism, classicism and prejudice occupy the minds of the Kenyan people. Proponents of inculturation should constantly emulate Christ: the hope of glory.

### References

- Arbuckle, G. (1991). *Earthing the Gospel*. New York: Orbis
- Brown, J. and Parker, R. (1989) *For God so Loved the World. Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A feminist Critique*. Pilgrim Press.
- Drago, P. (1980). *The Mission of the Local Church and the Inculturation of the Gospel: Mission and Dialogue*. Eds Molte, M; Lang, J. Maryknoll, New York.
- Healey, J. (1986) *Indigenization of Catholic Worship in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship.
- Kato, B. (1975). *The Gospel Cultural Context and Religious Syncretism*. In *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* Ed J. D. Douglas. Mineapolis. World Wide Publications.
- Magesa, L. (2004). *Anatomy of Inculturation; Transforming the Church in Africa*. Orbis Books. Maryknoll. New York
- Nsimiyu, A. (1986). *Vatican II: The Problem of Inculturation* Duquesne University Chicago USA.
- Otawa, S. (1992). *Statistics Canada Definition for Ethnicity*. SSTR Inc. Canada
- Reuther, R. 1989. *The Western Religious tradition and Violence against Women in the Home Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A feminist Critique*. Pilgrim Press.
- Schreiter, R. (1985). *Constructing Local Theologies*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Shorter, A. (1998). *Celibacy and African Culture*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications – Africa.
- Uzukwu, E. (1996). *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*. New York: Orbis.
- Waliggo, J. et al. (1986). *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency*. Nairobi: St. Paul Publications – Africa.
- Webber, M. 1992. *Economy and Society*. Rth, G. and Claus (Eds) Ephraim, W. (trans) V2 University of California Press. California.