

THE INFLUENCE OF VATICAN II'S PRINCIPLES ON CULTURE: IMPLICATIONS ON ETHNICITY AND SYNCRETIC PRACTICES AMONG CHRISTIANS IN BENIN CITY, EDO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study focuses on the influence of Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) principles on culture and its implications on ethnicity and syncretism among Christians in Benin City. The ecumenical meeting marked a significant shift in Catholic missiology and ecclesiology by affirming that culture constitutes of a legitimate context for the expression of Christian faith, engaging in evangelization from a local cultural reality without compromising doctrinal integrity. This situation creates a theological tension on how it can lead to authentic inculturation while avoiding syncretism that blurs the boundaries between Christian faith and indigenous religiosity. The study employs a historical and phenomenological approach using the document analysis of conciliar texts. Part of the findings is that Vatican II principles have facilitated the integration of indigenous languages, music, symbols, and communal practices into Christian worship, fostering greater participation and affirmation of ethnic identity. The study also identifies persistent syncretic practices, including ancestral rituals and protective rites, which often coexist with formal Christian observance. The persistence of syncretism is attributed to gaps in theological formation, a lack of foundation for new converts, and pastoral guidance. However, the study recommends that authentic inculturation requires sustained theological reflection, critical discernment, and Christ-centered pastoral strategies.

Keywords: African Christianity, Ethnicity, Inculturation, Syncretism, Second Vatican Council.

I. Introduction

The interaction between Christianity and indigenous culture in Africa has been historically complex and contested. Early missionary efforts often reflected a Eurocentric paradigm that assumed Western culture as normative, leading to the marginalization or suppression of local culture and religious expressions (Shorter, 1995). Within this missionary model, African ethnic identities, comprising languages, social practices, symbol systems, and religious cosmologies, were frequently interpreted as obstacles to the Christian faith rather than as potential loci for theological engagement (Bediako, 1995). Christianity in Africa has always existed within complex cultural and ethnic environments. In Benin City, ethnic identity, language, customs, and indigenous religious worldviews continue to shape the lives and practical experience of Christian faith. This cultural embeddedness raises critical theological and pastoral questions about how Christianity engages ethnicity without compromising its doctrinal integrity. Before the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the Roman Catholic Church's missionary approach in Nigeria largely reflected Western ecclesial and cultural assumptions. Indigenous cultural practices were frequently viewed with suspicion, and African religious expressions were often rejected as incompatible with the Christian faith. This historical posture provides an important context for examining the second Vatican redefinition of the Church's relationship with culture and ethnicity.

This tension remains a critical issue in African Christianity. In Benin, traditional beliefs, ancestral practices, and ethnic customs continue to coexist with Christianity; the distinction between legitimate cultural expression and syncretistic practice is often contested. The post Vatican II emphasis on inculturation became central to missiological and theological discourse among church leaders, especially in Africa, where inculturation is

understood not as mission, but as a dialogical encounter between the Gospel and culture (Shorter, 1995). African theologians like Kwame Bediako and Benezet Bujo have all affirmed that the Christian message can be articulated through African culture, which is categorized into cultural elements and evaluated in the light of Scriptures and Christian tradition (Bediako, 1995; Bujo, 2015). The religious landscape reflects this dynamic interface between Christianity and indigenous cultural systems. It comprises Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant Churches, Pentecostal, and African Independent Churches over centuries. However, their members blend traditional religiosity characterized by beliefs in ancestral spirits, divination, ritual protection, and a pervasive sense of communal spiritual causality. Based on this background, the study intends to examine these gaps in the literature and identify their implications on Christian's faith in Benin.

Contextual/Inculturation Theory

This study adopts contextual / inculturation theory as its primary interpretive framework for analyzing the relationship between ethnicity and syncretism in Christian faith, particularly within the context of Benin City. This theoretical choice is grounded in the conviction that Christianity is never expressed in a cultural vacuum but always embodied through the worldview, symbols, values, and social structures of a people. Inculturation theory, as articulated by Shorter (1988), Schreiter (1985), and Bevans (2002), emphasizes the dynamic interaction between Gospel and culture. It provides a theological lens through which ethnic identity and syncretic practices can be understood not merely as deviations from orthodoxy but as responses to the encounter between Christianity and indigenous worldviews.

Inculturation theory affirms that culture is not merely a vehicle for communicating Christian faith but constitutes the medium through which faith is lived and understood (Shorter, 1988). Cultural values, symbols, and narratives shape religious meaning. In Benin City, this principle explains why Christian faith is interpreted through ancestral consciousness, communal solidarity, spiritual causality, and ritual symbolism. Thus, ethnic identity is not external to Christian faith but forms the interpretive framework through which Christianity is appropriated. Schreiter (1985) describes inculturation as a dialogical process in which both Gospel and culture engage in mutual transformation. The Gospel challenges cultural assumptions, while culture reshapes the expression of faith. This interaction explains the emergence of syncretic tendencies: when Christianity fails to adequately engage local culture, believers negotiate meaning through religious blending. Inculturation theory emphasizes discernment rather than uncritical acceptance. Cultural elements that promote human dignity and social harmony are affirmed, while those incompatible with Christian doctrine are purified or transformed (Bevans, 2002).

According to Bujo (1992), African theology emerges from communal memory and cultural experience. In Benin City, ethnic identity becomes the cultural matrix through which Christianity takes local form. This perspective rejects earlier missionary assumptions that equated Christian authenticity with Western cultural patterns and instead affirms ethnicity as a legitimate theological resource. Inculturation theory interprets syncretism as a transitional stage in the encounter between Christianity and indigenous religion (Shorter, 1988). Orobator (2008) argues that syncretism persists in African Christianity because evangelization often fails to address the spiritual logic of African cosmology. In Benin City, syncretism reflects continuity with traditional beliefs concerning ancestral presence, spiritual causality, and ritual efficacy.

Second Vatican's Teachings on Culture and Ethnicity

The Second Vatican Council marked a decisive shift in Catholic missiology by redefining evangelization as an encounter between the Gospel and culture rather than the replacement of indigenous worldviews. Gaudium (1965) affirms that culture is essential to human dignity and that each person possesses legitimate cultural expressions through which faith can be articulated. Consequently, evangelization must engage the cultural and ethnic

realities of a people if it is to be authentic and enduring. In Benin City, evangelization takes place within a socio-religious context shaped by Benin traditional religion, ancestral consciousness, ritual symbolism, and communal identity. Vatican II's cultural openness provides a theological framework for understanding why Christianity in Benin City has not developed in cultural isolation but in continuous interaction with indigenous religious traditions. Missionaries are encouraged to study local cultures deeply so that the Christian faith may take root in indigenous patterns of thought and social life. Shorter (1988) argues that inculturation is inevitable in African Christianity because faith is always expressed through cultural practices. The use of indigenous language, symbols in worship, communal forms of prayer, and annual festivals are all incorporated into Christian liturgical practices. However, the Council teachings on culture also insist on inculturation that involves discernment and not uncritical assimilation. This discernment will be crucial in distinguishing inculturation from syncretism. The Second Vatican Council introduced a renewed theological vision that affirmed the dignity of all cultures and recognized the legitimacy of expressing the Christian faith within diverse ethnic contexts (Concilium, 1965). Documents such as *Gaudium et Spes*, *Lumen Gentium*, and *Ad Gentes* emphasized respect for cultural diversity and encouraged the adaptation of Christian worship and pastoral practice from an African context.

New Adaptation for Culture and Ethnicity

Vatican II articulated a renewed theological vision, where culture is understood as the totality of values, symbols, customs, and institutions through which human beings make meaningful existence (*Gentium*, 1965). The Council emphasized that the Church does not exist outside culture rather has its influence culture where situated. Consequently, no single cultural expression can claim exclusive ownership of the Christian faith (*Nostra*, 1965). The Council further encouraged missionaries and local churches to recognize the presence of "seeds of the Word" within indigenous cultures, which the Gospel can illuminate and transform (*Ad Gente*, 1965). This theological shift laid the foundation for what later became known as "inculturation" an interaction between faith and culture (Shorter, 1995).

Christianity and Inculturation among Churches in Benin City

Ethnicity in this context is not merely social but deeply religious, influencing perceptions of causality, protection, and moral obligation. Following Vatican II, Christian worship and practice in Benin City increasingly incorporated indigenous languages, music, symbols, and communal patterns of participation. This development reduced the sense of cultural alienation previously associated with Christianity and fostered a stronger sense of local ownership of the faith. African theologians have noted that such developments are consistent with the historical pattern of Christianity's expansion, which has always involved translation into local cultural categories (Bediako, 1995).

Inculturation in Benin City has therefore functioned as a positive force, enabling Christianity to speak meaningfully to the lived experiences of believers. However, the effectiveness of inculturation depends on sustained theological reflection, a condition that has not always been met. Many Christians in Benin City actively engaged in traditional religious practices alongside formal church participation, leading to what some scholars describe as syncretism, the blending of traditional religious practices that compromise doctrinal integrity (Ukpong, 2019). The persistence of syncretic practices among Christians in Benin City raises critical questions about the actual impact of the Second Vatican Council's cultural principles. Though the Council liberated local churches from rigid Western cultural forms and affirmed the legitimacy of ethnic cultural identity in Christian liturgical practices, etc., it also insisted that culture must be purified and elevated by the Gospel rather than incorporated uncritically (Ukpong, 2019). Yet, empirical observations from biblical scholars in Benin City suggest that many ethnic cultural elements, such as rites of ancestral communication, protective charms, and ritualized crisis responses, continue to be practiced alongside Christian worship without sufficient theological discernment (Schreiter, 2016).

This situation highlights a theological tension that is expected to drive its influence from Vatican II principles on culture that is bound to authentic inculturation, while avoiding syncretism that blurs the boundaries between Christian faith and indigenous religiosity.

Cultural Integration and Syncretism among Christians in Benin City

Despite the gains of inculturation, syncretism remains a persistent feature of Christian life among Christians in Benin City. Syncretism commonly manifests as the simultaneous adherence to Christian beliefs and traditional religious practices, particularly in moments of crisis such as illness, infertility, or economic hardship (Schreiter, 2016). Scholars of African Christianity note that such practices often arise from existential concerns rather than doctrinal confusion (Mbiti, 1991). Some Christians revert to traditional religious practices through ancestral rituals, divination, or protective charms while maintaining church affiliation (Bujo, 1992). This phenomenon reflects the enduring power of ethnic religious worldviews that have not been adequately reinterpreted within Christian theology. Vatican II explicitly warned against such uncritical accommodation, insisting that cultures must be purified and transformed by the Gospel rather than absorbed by indigenous cultures (Gentium, 1985). The persistence of syncretism therefore points to deficiencies in pastoral leadership rather than to inherent flaws from second Vatican's cultural openness. Ukpong (2016) observes that where Christianity fails to address the existential questions embedded in local cultures, believers are likely to maintain dual religious allegiances as a survival strategy. From this perspective, syncretism among Christians in Benin should not be interpreted merely as religious disloyalty but as a transitional response to incomplete evangelization and insufficient church foundation for members. Orobator (2008) argues that African Christians often integrate traditional religious elements because Christianity initially failed to address their worldview adequately. This insight is particularly relevant among churches in Benin. Therefore, cultural elements that promote communal harmony among Christians, respect for life, and moral responsibility should be integrated into Christian life, while elements that contradict the centrality of Christ should be transformed or abandoned.

Implications on Christian Faith

Reclaiming Benin Ethnic Identity within Christian Faith

In Benin City, Christianity developed within a strong ethnic consciousness shaped by the Benin Kingdom's history, ancestral institutions, guild systems (such as the *Ìgún* bronze casters), and ritual symbolism. Before Vatican II, missionary Christianity often approached these cultural realities with suspicion, contributing to a perceived tension between being authentically Christian and authentically Benin. Vatican II's affirmation that the Church is not bound to any single culture (Gentium, 1965) legitimized the expression of Christian faith within Benin's cultural categories. This has enabled Christians in Benin City to integrate indigenous language, proverbs, communal values, and symbolic expressions into worship and Sunday school teachings without perceiving such practices as a betrayal of faith. As a result, ethnic identity is increasingly understood as a context of faith, not a rival to it (Shorter, 1995; Bujo, 1992).

Evangelization and the Benin Traditional Religious Worldview

Evangelization in Benin City takes place within in a religious environment where belief in spiritual causality, ancestral presence, and ritual mediation remains influential. Traditional responses to misfortune, consulting shrines, appeasing spirits, or invoking ancestral protection continue to shape religious behavior, even among baptized Christians. Vatican II's missiological vision (Ad Gentes, 1965) implies that evangelization in Benin City must address these existential concerns rather than merely condemning their expressions. Where Christian teaching fails to engage questions of protection, healing, destiny, and communal well-being, syncretism emerges as a pragmatic response. Mbiti's observation that Africans are "notoriously religious" is particularly evident in Benin City, where faith is expected to be functional and efficacious (Mbiti, 1991). Vatican II thus implies that evangelization must speak credibly to live realities if Christian faith is to replace, rather than

coexist uneasily with, traditional religious practices.

Liturgical Inculturation in Benin City Churches

Following Concilium (1965), churches in Benin City, particularly Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations, have increasingly adopted inculturated liturgical practices. These include: (i) worship in the Edo language, (ii) use of indigenous music and drums, (iii) dance and bodily expression during liturgy, and (iii) communal participation reflective of Benin social organization. Such practices have strengthened Christian identity by making worship culturally intelligible and emotionally engaging. Where worship resonates with Benin aesthetics and communal values, believers are less inclined to seek spiritual fulfillment through traditional religious alternatives. Thus, liturgical inculturation functions as a pastoral response to syncretism (Shorter, 1995; Schreiter, 2016).

Reinterpretation of Ancestral Consciousness

One of the most sensitive areas of syncretism in Benin City concerns ancestral veneration. Ancestors occupy a central place in Benin cosmology as moral guardians and sources of blessing. Vatican II's openness to truth in non-Christian religions (Nostra, 1965) permits a critical engagement with this belief rather than outright rejection. In localized Christian theology, ancestral respect has been reinterpreted through: (i) Christian remembrance of the dead, (ii) the doctrine of the communion of saints, and (iii) moral continuity across generations. However, Vatican II also implies clear theological boundaries. Ritual dependence on ancestors as mediators of divine power conflicts with Christian monotheism and Christ's unique mediatorship (Lumen, 1965). This tension remains a key pastoral challenge in Benin City.

Denominational Pluralism and Syncretism among Christians in Benin City

Syncretism in Benin City is often situational rather than doctrinal. Many Christians profess orthodox beliefs while simultaneously participating in traditional rituals during crises such as illness, barrenness, or business failure. This pattern reflects continuity with Benin cosmology, where spiritual forces are believed to intervene directly in human affairs. Vatican II's acknowledgment that cultures contain both values and limitations (Gaudium, 1965) allows this phenomenon to be interpreted pastorally rather than judgmentally. In the Benin context, syncretism indicates (i) incomplete church foundation for new converts, (ii) fear-driven religiosity.

Evangelization that is not fully grounded in sound Scriptures. Orobator (2008) argues that African Christians often practice syncretism because Christianity has not been sufficiently "domesticated" within their worldview. In Benin City, this insight explains why syncretism persists even among long-established Christian communities. Benin City's religious landscape is marked by Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, and African Independent Churches. This pluralism has intensified syncretism, as believers often move between churches seeking healing, prophecy, or spiritual power. Vatican II's ecumenical vision (Unitatis, 1965) implies that fragmented Christian witness undermines evangelization. In Benin City, competition among churches sometimes reinforces fear-based spirituality, pushing believers toward syncretic solutions. Ecumenical cooperation, especially in Sunday school service and social engagement would strengthen Christian credibility and reduce religious confusion.

Evangelization, Ecumenism, and Syncretism

The plural Christian landscape of Benin City has contributed to syncretism, as believers often move between denominations in search of spiritual efficacy. Vatican II's ecumenical vision emphasizes unity in Christian witness as essential to credible evangelization (Unitatis, 1965). A fragmented Christian message can reinforce syncretic practices, whereas ecumenical cooperation strengthens new converts and clarifies Christian identity. Vatican II thus links evangelization, unity, and the reduction of syncretism.

II. Conclusion

In Benin City, where Christianity encounters a deeply entrenched traditional religious worldview shaped by ancestral consciousness, ritual symbolism, and communal values, Vatican II's teachings have enabled a more constructive engagement between faith and culture. The Council's emphasis on dialogue, liturgical adaptation, and theological discernment has encouraged the expression of Christian faith through Benin cultural categories, thereby strengthening Christian identity and fostering a sense of belonging among believers. This development has helped to correct earlier missionary approaches that often alienated indigenous culture and unintentionally reinforced syncretic tendencies. However, syncretism remains a persistent pastoral and theological challenge in Benin City. The continued reliance on traditional religious practices among Christians, especially in moments of crisis, reveals gaps in evangelization and new converts foundation. Vatican II provides a framework for addressing this challenge, not through cultural rejection, but through deeper inculturation, sustained theological formation, and contextual pastoral engagement. Where Christianity meaningfully addresses existential concerns such as protection, healing, destiny, and communal well-being, the attraction of syncretic alternatives is significantly reduced.

Furthermore, the Council's ecumenical vision highlights the need for unity among Christian denominations in Benin City. Denominational fragmentation and religious competition have contributed to doctrinal confusion and religious fluidity, thereby intensifying syncretic practices. Ecumenical collaboration in Sunday school programs, social engagement, and theological education would strengthen Christian witness and promote doctrinal clarity. In conclusion, the enduring implication of Vatican II for Christian faith in Benin is the call to embody a Christianity that is both authentically Benin and genuinely Christian. Such a faith does not merely coexist with indigenous culture but critically engages and transforms it in the light of the Gospel. When inculturation is deep, new converts sustained, and pastoral engagement contextual, Christian faith becomes a transformative force capable of reshaping cultural consciousness while preserving ethnic identity. This remains the central challenge and enduring promise of Vatican II for Christianity in Benin City.

III. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study made some recommendations. These are as follows: Churches should develop Sunday school programs that explicitly address indigenous beliefs and practices, offering theological reinterpretation rather than silence or condemnation. Church authorities should continue to promote liturgical inculturation. Local churches should reinterpret ancestral consciousness theologically with reflection on Christian doctrine and Benin cosmology. Since syncretism transcends denominational boundaries, Christians in Benin City should strengthen ecumenical cooperation across denominations.

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