

# **MISSIO Conference on Inculturation on 23/11/2014.**

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*I am not going to spend much time on definition and theological consideration about inculturation. This talk is going to be more of a sharing of experiences of 48 years of practical inculturation within the Malawi context both on catechetical, liturgical and artistic inculturation.*

## **1) A. My preparation outside Malawi**

*I was ordained in 1967 and came to Malawi the same year. This was following the end of Vatican 2 (1965) and the publication of its first documents. At that period, Canada had started working on a catechetical program for primary schools; but our seminary training did not include catechesis as such and anthropology was not part of our pastoral training at all, though we were missionary, we were trained as the local clergy. I was introduced to these two subjects, for the first time, in London (Sept. 67 to Nov. 67) during a crash course in pastoral. I learnt the Latin mass but never celebrated it since the liturgy had changed to vernacular. My first mass was celebrated in French. While in London, I had to learn to celebrate in English, awaiting for learning the local language in Malawi.*

## **B. Within Malawi; Language centre and first parish at Kasina.**

*Arrived in Malawi in December 1967, I had to struggle to learn the local language and the local culture for six months and after a few months, to be introduced to the Chichewa mass.*

*After these six months of investing in the language and the culture, I was put in a parish (Kasina) alone without another priest for two months, struggling to understand the people and perform the pastoral duties of the sacraments. Catechism was being taught by the catechist with a series of questions and answers, without understanding their meanings. My first homilies were written down and read in church (for the first months) until the time did not allow it anymore. One was forced into improvisation. Looking at the role of the priest, he was seen as a servant of the sacramental machinery. The catechist was a teacher of dogma (though questions and answers) and a person targeting the non-Christians and leading them to baptism. Instructions were limited, through similar methods, leading to first communion, confession, confirmation and marriage. No visual aids, no practical examples from daily life of the people, were used.*

*My first attempt in catechetical started there in putting my effort on presenting Christ (in a Malawi setup) using slides that I made and showed in the evening to various groups.*

*This was my first attempt to present the Gospel and Christ as a real human being, (not a European or an Indian). The people who featured on this catechetical material were Malawians dressed in their day-by clothes, using Malawi gestures and moving within the geography of the country. They were not strangers imported from outside. They were meant to bring about the first fundamental truth that God became man, their brothers and sisters and not a different God from the one their ancestors worshiped some generations before.*

*This experience of catechetical and this attempts to provide visual materials were only half way when I was changed of parish and had to go to Nsipe, at the other end of the diocese.*

## **2) The pre-stage of Kungoni**

*This parish had been neglected for decades. The missionary group I belonged to, was new in the parish of 40,000 baptised. The parish priest was 67 years old and I was 25. We had 40 outstations to visit, to do the census, in order to find out who were our Christians and those who had left the church for other churches. We had to organise a catechumenate and some catechetical instructions*

*for the Christians. By then, I was more at ease with the language, particularly by living in the villages for weeks at a stretch, sharing people hospitality and food, doing riddles and singing with them in the evening. My only means of transport was a motorcycle that would make me dependant on the people for everything, I went with little luggage, no food, my bed sheets and my mosquito net. This was the best way to learn catechetic and the culture from the grass roots.*

*During the five and half years spent in that parish, my wish and determination of continuing with catechetic, was confirmed, so was the necessity of adapted visual material. I had to complete the series started in the first parish and began training local artists (painters and carvers), to highlight the catechetical aspect of church furnishing and decoration. This is the humble beginning of Kungoni Centre for art.*

*I lead the local choirs to experiment with the new life approach to catechism (sweeping aside the questions and answers method).*

*Together we worked out a yearly syllabus and instruction for first communion, very often using the story-telling form from the culture (nthano) woven into these lessons. Singing and dancing also become part of these. Liturgy and catechetic joined forces to focus on Christian living instead of teaching dogma. Christ our brother was journeying with us, sharing our culture and our way of life. Beside these various activities, I was writing notes and starting an embryonic research on the Ngoni way of life.*

*I was in charge of the choir at the parish. I sent some members to Lilongwe, to the poor Clares Convent to learn new liturgical songs and dances. The Poor Clares had been the pioneers of Vatican II since 1962. In their convent they were the forerunners of inculturation during the celebration of the Office and the Sunday masses. They had a few gifted sisters who were composing local liturgical music and local choreography. They themselves trained our people to spread their hymns and liturgical innovations throughout the parish.*

*The artists whom I trained on the veranda of the mission were involved in carving church furniture with local character, such as altars, lecterns, tabernacles, statues. Soon these carvings found their way to the parish church, its outstations and also to the poor Clare convent itself. Soon their artistic creations were at the headquarters of Dedza diocese, other parishes and later within the seven dioceses of Malawi. Art, liturgy and catechetic went hand in hand to serve the cause of inculturation.*

### **3) Training in catechetic, Liturgy and anthropology**

*While all this activity was going on, I felt the need to renew and deepen my understanding of catechetic and liturgy. I also deplored my lack of knowledge in the field of anthropology. I felt the need for a Sabbatical and further studies in these fields. The year 1974 to 1975 were spent at the Gabba pastoral institute in Uganda. The year 1975 – 1976 at SOAS (London) where I learned anthropology. I returned to Malawi at the end 1976 with the intention of starting an official Art centre for school leavers, a programme of cultural research and a more perfected approach for the parish I was in to catechetic and liturgy. Before I started developing these new initiative, the bishop decided otherwise. I was not returning to Nsipe but going to Mua instead. This marked the official beginning of the Kungoni centre for Art.*

*Despite my short lived disappointment of not returning to my Ngonis, I found much more! I was to be led to a crossroad of various cultures, Chewa, Yao, Wiza, Matengo, Ngoni and Sena cultures. Mua was situated right on the trade route. The area was one of oldest settlement of the Chewa with its long history (going back to 750AD), Mua was the oldest Catholic mission (1902) and the cradle of Christianity. It had in its vicinity the largest forest reserve from which the artists would profit. Above all. Mua was the meeting point between various religions. African traditional religion lived side by side with Muslims and Christians of different denominations.*

*This was a paradise for a researcher, a green garden for the carvers and a challenge for someone who is passionate for interfaith dialogue.*

#### **4) The beginning of Kungoni as a Centre of Culture and Art**

*Mua has been my home and passion for the last 38 years! During this lifelong enterprise, the Kungoni project has taken various directions, always culture, art and inculturation related. Its fruits are clearly visible today and the stock taking during those years of Sabbatical can't be denied.*

##### **A) Kungoni offers a library – Research Centre**

*With books, articles, notes and personal research accumulated from 1976 until present. The library also stores photos, prints, slides and DVD's from 1967 until present. These are being digitised and preserved for the future. The storeroom at the back of the library host a large collection of artefacts, costumes etc., used for cultural performances and for display in the museum.*

*As part of the library are the personal hand-written notes of my anthropological research (from 1973 to 2014. It represents 80 copy books of 100 to 150 pages each). All of those have been scanned. Others are being typed and archived digitally. Material from these notes has been published as books or online. Others have formed the base for articles published in various local magazines. Among the many pages of notes some are focused on interviews with chiefs and contain detailed genealogies of chieftainship (kept orally) and proving the legitimacy to their positions with regards to justice and peace issue. Today politicians and traditional leaders tend to take advantage of their own positions and give in to corruption. The library also stores photos, prints, slides and DVD's on inculturation. Some of those have been published as videos and CD's.*

*More than 700hrs of filming on videos and analogue tapes have been digitalised and archived for posterity. They capture traditional ceremonies of various tribes and attempts at inculturation over the years. The library – Research Centre offers its service to researchers and university students.*

##### **B) A Cultural Museum**

*Kungoni offers a Cultural Museum with three spacey rooms dedicated to the mission, the Chewa, the Ngoni and the Yao cultures. Photos and exhibits display their religious outlook and their rich cultural heritage with regard to their respective life cycles and beliefs. The front room is at times used as a conference and as a mini-theatre for international and local guests who do their introduction to the local cultures and spirituality. The second room contains one of the largest Chewa masks collection that has been described and explained in one of our publications "When animal sing and spirits dance". The third room introduces the Ngoni, the Yao and the Islamic faith. The museum is open daily to the public.*

##### **C) Kungoni offers a Showroom and Art gallery**

*Both buildings display the production of hundreds of local artists who have been trained at the different workshops on the premises (one for the carvers, one for the painters and the third one for the ladies who recycle local material and make handbags, Jewellers etc.) Both buildings provide a selling point for the artists' economic independence.*

##### **D) Hotel called Namalikhate**

*Kungoni offers a Hotel called Namalikhate (made of five chalets. a kitchen and a dining room) where guests are hosted and fed during their stay for conferences and visits fostering their learning experience at Kungoni.*

##### **E) Cultural Troupe**

*Kungoni offers a Cultural Troupe (composed of 20 families). The troupe has, for the past 10 years, acted as cultural ambassador of their rich spiritual and cultural heritage to the international visitors*

and to the local communities. They enhance the cultural course. They are the backbone for the annual cultural festival. At times they take part in inculturated services performed at Mua Parish or elsewhere in Malawi.

#### **F) Outside amphitheatre**

Kungoni offers an Outside amphitheatre which is next to the cultural museum. It provides a rally point for special masses or cultural events such as the one mentioned above.

#### **G) Online database**

Kungoni will soon offer an online database focused on the Kungoni art production, both religious and other. (This will include the various churches and chapels that have been decorated with large wall paintings and ornated with Kungoni carvings). The epicentre of this work will be the Art Gallery, the work around Kungoni and at Mua Parish, other project all over Malawi, those within its neighbouring countries of Africa and projects of major value all over the other continents of the world.

Such a database will include the photos of the artists, and their biographies. It will show the various types of trees that their makers have used and their specificity in terms of flowers, leaves, barks, fruits and pods. It will also explain their various usages beside wood carvings. This project will also include other types of indigenous trees (that are not used for wood carving) and a great variety of indigenous flowers with a detailed list of their usage, culturally, ritually, domestically and for medicinal purpose.

#### **H) Parish Church**

Kungoni Offers a Parish Church and 25 out-station churches, distributed in a radius of 20kms, where services are performed on a regular base, often with a priests or a lay leaders. These services commonly follow the pedagogy of inculturation. Some of those have been published on videos and DVD's available for home viewing. Important events, such as yearly cultural festivals, have been shown on National Television or on other TV stations.

### **5) The Priority of Kungoni with regards to inculturation.**

#### **A) The prevalence of orality over and above the written word.**

Cultures function predominantly on oral traditions (through myth, storytelling, proverbs, riddles and songs). One should not forget about the formation of the Old Testament and the Gospel. Both were handed to us first in oral form before the advent of writing. The compilation of the oral traditions of those who had faith in Yahweh had to wait for 900BC (during the reign of Solomon) and the Gospel of Jesus, preserved through word of mouth, had to wait for the writing of the first Gospel in 50AD. Most African communities have only become literate around 1900AD. Before and even now (in the rural areas) still largely rely on oral history and oral data. African Traditional religion has conveyed its faith in God and its morality in an oral mode through the methods mentioned above. God spoken word is more powerful than a written letter. This explains why the Kungoni efforts have been giving priority to the story telling form (nthano), proverbs, myths, songs and dances, dramatization and ritual action.

#### **B) The importance of respecting God's pedagogy in his revelation to us.**

Though God is transcendent, He is also immanent. He is near to us and reveals Himself through his creation all around us, in our environment. Through his saving deeds He also reveals himself in human history. Not only in the past, but now, today. Not only for people far away, but for us Malawian, his chosen people of today.

**C) The continuity between the god of the ancestors and the living God of the Christians.**

*This is emphasised by calling God with respect, using his most meaningful names and titles within the culture, instead of using foreign names that do not have any echo or no significance. African cultures are varied. Some functions on a patrilineal system, other on a matrilineal one. Some cultures emphasises the fatherly or the motherly aspect of God. Some both.*

**D) The importance of the humanity of Jesus as the Son of God.**

*The man Jesus (the Jew) became the Christ of faith who belongs to all tribes and all nations. That is why the Kungoni artists have portrayed Him and His Mother as belonging to Africa and to Malawi in particular. He is one of them. He is their brother who shares the titles and the roles within their community. He can be called the Great Initiator, the Medicine Man, the King or the Chief, the Prophet, the Priest, the Redeemer, the Great Ancestor etc.*

*When the Bantu refer to "munthu", they refer to a black man only and never to a stranger. The artists of Kungoni have featured Him in all these roles while decorating and furnishing the churches. He moves and acts as a Malawian would do.*

**E) The concern for localisation and meaningfulness of the message. (relevance).**

*Inculturation is a new incarnation of God in our land, in us. Kungoni has developed the concept of the kachere tree to express this transforming process. The seed falls from the sky and feeds from the local tree to eventually transform it into a super tree. We are called to become God, but it is from our flesh that this new reality grows. It feeds on our own humanness, on our own culture, on our own human values, on our own environment. We have to value what is our own and believe that it is worthy of God, because He created us. We should not practice self-hatred and wait for someone else to do it for us. The artists at Kungoni --have been told that "Sand becomes crystal", that "Art immortalises trees", and that we should be proud of being children of God and that our culture and land are worth of Him and reveals His mystery. Artists respect God and the trees, in carving out of them, altars, chalices and ciborium. They use normal grass for the decoration of the sanctuary; it is as good as silver and gold. The success of a liturgy is not to be judged by its servile following of the rubrics but by its meaningfulness for the local community.*

**F) Our culture is somehow sacred (even if it is in change all the time) and is a stepping stone for the Revelation of God.**

*One should not be satisfied with a superficial study of African culture, often based on a legalistic approach of right and wrong, or a caricature of African culture based on outside criteria. African faith and cultures are varied and complex. One has to be part of them in order to understand their deep symbolism and relevance. My own pastoral experience shows that I spent more than 40 years in trying to understand these cultures, more than 40 years... to publish my first book about them. A thorough study of culture reveals God's pedagogy and concern for his people. It also unveils God's great creativity in leading his people to salvation through a variety of ways... unknown to us?*

**G) The importance of a holistic and of an interfaith approach.**

*God is the only one who has the answer about who will be saved. God is so great, so creative and so loving that He leads all people, all cultures and all religious faiths to Himself. He simply asks us to respect each other and to live in peace with one another. Our love and concern for each other will bring about unity and salvation is left to Him alone. One can recall the example from the Koran that compares God to an elephant touched by a group of blind people. Each one touches the elephant and apprehends one of its limbs, (trunk, ear, tail, legs) and describes it accordingly as slim, slender*

or thick. No one perceives the entire elephant and so too with the different faiths. The full revelation is exclusively left to Him alone.

### **H) The respect for the environment that has moulded these cultures and its people.**

Being an artist myself and the trainer of generations of woodcarvers, I have been very much aware of the intrinsic link between environment and culture. Every symbol conveying spiritual values is deeply rooted into the environment. People's economic survival (as farmers) depends on the very narrow balance on how they manage their environment. No trees, no rain, no food, no medicine, no shade etc. It is an endless chain that one can easily break if one is motivated by greed and ambition. The degradation and the deforestation that Malawi experiences today has prompted me to go and photograph the last species of trees and plants that are left so that the next generation may learn about them. The Kungoni team collects the seeds and tries to propagate them together with other people of good will, before these species become completely extinct. This information and photographs will be part of the current database on Christian art mentioned above.

### **I) My own journey as a missionary into inculturation**

As a missionary of Africa, I have been taken through various steps before I could even think and do anything about inculturation. I had to undergo a personal experience of rebirth to my new home and to the people I was sent to minister. I had to learn to speak, to think, and to act within the parameter of a new identity that I was trying to achieve. I had to go through all the necessary steps of growth (rites of passage) in order to catch up with the Malawians whom I wanted to identify with. Because of the great mixture of ethnic groups that I encountered, I had to become a Chewa with the Chewa, a Ngoni with the Ngoni, a Yao with the Yao. I had to discover their own country, their respective history, their family systems, their own environment etc. I started developing an interest in the animal world (mammals, birds, snakes and insects) and also into the world of plants and trees, (their medical uses). Throughout this journey, I discovered a rich spirituality and the presence of a loving and caring God who is infinitely bigger than the one I had first met as a theology student in Canada.

The unfolding of the Kungoni activities as a Centre for Culture and Art followed very much my own personal growth. Though inculturation was the ultimate target right from the time of my arrival, the years 1967 to 1970 had to be spent in learning to speak. The period of 1970 to 1976 taught me to think in the culture. The period of 1977 to 2000 brought about the possibility of acting in the culture by establishing the Kungoni Centre and its various activities. The period of 2001 to 2014 was blessed with several publications and the need to reflect on the past and on the history of the Centre. Together with a team, I look forward to publishing online the summary of its activities and its major achievements. This is the database mentioned above. As an appendix to this work, the urgent need to show greater concern for Malawi's environment that is presently at risk. I would very much like to spend my remaining years and energy on browsing over my voluminous notes and do more publishing for further generation. I am presently working on a pre-Christian spirituality of the Chewa. I would also like to spend more time at painting my inner experience of my real home, my only home, Malawi.