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## THEORETICAL DISCUSSIONS OF INCULTURATION FOR TRANSFORMATIVE EVANGELIZATION

### APPROACHES FROM INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF AFRICAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL HERITAGE AND VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS

**Abstract.** This paper delves into cultural dynamics in spiritual, social and material aspects of the human person in his/her existential situation. Culture is anthropological element in theology. It has to do with the intellectual character of theology. Culture's intelligibility makes it belong to the entire intellectual enterprise of humankind. Indeed, culture is intrinsically linked with sustainable development whose functions include educating and socializing of young members to enable them to graduate into mature adults, among other issues. The paper delineates inculturation and approaches from scholarly writings coming from Catholic higher institutions in Africa. The essay explores the mission of inculturation and how it can counteract forces of discrimination of any kind and dehumanization of the human person. The theological basis of inculturation is the incarnational principle.

**Key words:** Inculturation, culture, African Culture, development.

## INTRODUCTION

The title of our presentation is twofold. The focus is on the correlations between systematic theology and culture. The significance of contextual sensitivity lies in the awareness it excites, that is, the awareness in a local Church that its grasp of Jesus Christ in the African context is becoming less intelligible than it should be because translated in foreign theological jargons and language. This article also delves into the science of sociology and the light it can shed on theology since theologies are influenced also by the societies in which theologians, believers and even the magisterium live. So, the inculturated praxis is indeed the actual theologies of all those

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believers in question aiming at their spiritual and material welfare. The discussion is situated in this twofold perspective. The presentation gives a larger canvas about Catholic theological institutes in Africa concerning the current opportunities and challenges for theological inculturation in these learning institutes. I would like to proceed and briefly discuss on this suggestive theme of inculturation, since it involves a deeply human reality in which the faith becomes, so to say, entirely one with human flesh and bones (*cf.* Gen 2:23). Humanity's personal, social and indeed his/her entire existential dimensions pass through the aspect of culture.

### INCULTURATION

The Vatican Council II says that, "by his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man."<sup>1</sup> Incarnation as a paradigm of inculturation situates Christianity as a sacramental reality by nature at the heart of man and his culture.

Moreover, the history of evangelization has not only been but continues to be a process of inculturation.<sup>2</sup> The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*<sup>3</sup> hints at this when it says that evangelization involves, "a living exchange [...] between the Church and the diverse cultures of people." Inculturation as a theological term was popularized by John Paul II's encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) but needless to say it predates that encyclical.

On the other hand in the discussion of relation of faith to culture<sup>4</sup> two exaggerations should be avoided namely the "otherworldliness" of the faith and the overt taking away of the eschatological aspect of faith as if there is no hope for a future, far better and superior life.

<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Inculturation according to John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, Nos. 52–54 is "the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures."

<sup>3</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, Nos. 58, 44.

<sup>4</sup> Vatican Council II defines culture as referring to "all those things which go to the refining and developing of man's diverse mental and physical endowments. He strives to subdue the earth by his knowledge and his labour; he humanizes social life both in the family and in the whole civic community through the improvement of customs and institutions; he expresses through his works the great spiritual experiences and aspirations of men throughout the ages; he communicates and preserves them to be an inspiration for the progress of many, even of all mankind." *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 53.

Culture should not be viewed as antagonistic to nature. It has the traces of man's/woman's mind and genius. Culture has socio-economic and political aspects, socio-religious and even technical aspects. Culture is oriented toward integral human liberation and development.

#### CHRISTOLOGICAL CRITERION OF INCULTURATION

The incarnation is the coming of the Son of God in human flesh and history (*cf.* Lk 2:16–21). The original design of a humanity created in the image and likeness of God is confirmed by the incarnational principle.

In the document *Faith and Inculturation* (1988), the International Theological Commission, dealt with the question of cultural pluralism in the framework of a missionary perspective, related to the evangelization of peoples.<sup>5</sup> It asserted that, from time to time, the divine revelations must be rethought, reformulated and lived differently within each culture. In multifarious contexts, the “principle of truth” cannot be regulated by the mere “cultural means”.

It follows that the fundamental significance of Jesus Christ is indeed not determined more by socio-cultural contexts of the *Nations* to whom He is being proclaimed, than by revealed truth. The importance of Jesus Christ is determined primarily and first of all by “who he is,” and only to a certain extent by socio-cultural contexts. Otherwise, it could risk falling into that hermeneutical tendency by which Christology becomes a *variable* of cultural anthropology.<sup>6</sup> Jesus Christ is one and universal.

The Christian faith, though universal, must not avoid the exigencies of pluri-inculturation. The Christian faith cannot be identified with any one single culture, nor with the culture in which the original revelation of the Christological truth is incarnated, where, it brought many and penetrating innovations and suggestions, such that it is not possible to identify the Christian faith with its Jewish or Hellenistic inculturation.<sup>7</sup>

It is to be borne in mind that the need of reinterpretation, implemented by an inculturated theology and praxis with reference to evangelization, is not to be understood as a “reinvention” of the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is

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<sup>5</sup> *Cf. L'Osservatore Romano*, No. 40, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2002, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

the only Saviour of all.<sup>8</sup> He is the one and only mediator between God and humanity (*cf.* 1 Tim 2:5). The definitive and absolute nature of Christian Revelation and the unity of the mystery of Christ, the uniqueness and universality of his mediation and also the Church's salvific role—as the sacrament and instrument of salvation are the fundamental principles without which the Christian mission would be not only propaganda but useless and harmful.<sup>9</sup>

In a classic study the Protestant H. Richard Niebuhr (1894–1962), brother of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), identified five relationships of Jesus to culture: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ as transformer of culture.<sup>10</sup>

In the view of Christ against culture, Christ is countercultural. Jesus alone is Lord and so we cannot compromise our faith with the kingdoms of this world (*cf.* 1 Jn 2:15–16). Nonetheless it is to be clearly borne in mind that matter was created by God and even elevated by the incarnate *Logos*. However one cannot deny that the world is under the power of evil. Christ of culture underlines the fact that Christ did not come to condemn the world but to embrace and bless it along with its culture. Christ above culture underscores an approach which is synthetic. Christ is the Lord who is both of this world and of the other. He is both God and man. Christ and culture in paradox is an approach which is dualistic. It sees this earthly life as a groaning to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling (*cf.* 2 Cor 5:1-2). Lastly Christ as the transformer of culture emphasizes the participation of the *Logos* in creation.

The Christ of contemporary (African) culture is all of these Christ(s), yet no one of them alone. The work of culture is the work of grace, and the power of grace is expressed in culture (as the synthesists hold). On the other side we live in this world of culture while not being completely of it (as the dualists affirm). Yet this world is destined for God's Kingdom, and we are called to facilitate its movement towards that Kingdom<sup>11</sup> (as the conversionists or those who hold that Christ is the transformer of culture insist). All the while, the fundamentalists (Christ against culture) remind us that the Kingdom of God ultimately is not of this world. The cultural Christians (Christ of culture proponents) encourage us to commend the Gospel message to those who might otherwise neglect, ignore and underrate it.

<sup>8</sup> *Cf.* JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, No. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Cf.* Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, No. 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Cf.* H. RICHARD NIEBUHR, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951). Quoted in Mariasusai DHAVAMONY, *Christian Theology of Inculturation* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1997), 85–88.

<sup>11</sup> *Cf.* *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 34.

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AFRICAN SOCIOLOGICAL STRANDS  
AS THE CONTEXT FOR INCULTURATED PRAXIS

In his book *A Listening Church*, Eugene E. Elochukwu states that:

My chief interest is in designing a pattern of living Christian community in Africa that pays close attention to African sociopolitical and religious resources as well as to the Christian tradition. I would like to reexamine the kind of society which produced and produces African Christians. [...] It is my belief that this society, taken in historical perspective, is the context for the emergence of a renewed Christian community.<sup>12</sup>

African socio-cultural and religious contexts highlight patterns which derive from indispensable resources for the reconstruction of the entire African society and Church. The challenge is to be faithful to the Church's tradition and at the same time interpret it in varied contexts in which the Church's mission is conducted. The corollary is inculturation and the adaptation of the good African cultural elements in the entire life of the Church. Catholic theological institutes in Africa must have a twofold fidelity. They should keep both these two aspects, namely the indigenizing and pilgrim principles of theology and thus avoid syncretism (attempt to reconcile incompatible elements) and false particularism (unjustifiable deviation from papal teaching and jurisdiction).<sup>13</sup>

AFRICAN CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

Development is described holistically in *Populorum Progressio*. That is, authentic development must be integral in that it has to promote the common good and the good of the entire person. Mere economic development is inimical to personal, social and moral growth.<sup>14</sup>

In an article "Is Culture in South-Eastern Tanzania Development-Unfriendly?," J.A.R. Wembah-Rashid argues that development is perceived to take place when people change their existing culture (patterns of thought and

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<sup>12</sup> Eugene E. UZUKWU, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, Rome, 1990, Nos. 54–56.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, Rome, March 1967, No. 14.

behaviour) and adopt new ones deemed as more effective.<sup>15</sup> All cultures possess the potential for accepting or resisting development.

Indeed any one culture has its way of uniting spiritual, social and material aspects of the world. Any kind of knowledge (spiritual, religious, scientific, technological) is a product of culture. Technology can be said to be an enterprise common to all human cultures.<sup>16</sup> Thus in Africa the creation of some more simple forms of technology antecedes modern science. For instance there has been traditional medicine. Among the Abagusii of Kenya, life was saved in some instances by a traditional surgeon, whereby traditional skills and knowledge are applied in such a delicate procedure with few complications.<sup>17</sup> The African believes in numinous power. The universe is controlled and directed by imperceptible mystical forces and powers. Some people-spirits, medicine men, witches, rainmakers, priests-know how to access and control these powers.<sup>18</sup>

It is not farfetched to suggest that at times mainstream medical narrative of the Western world does not give ultimate solutions to humanity's quest for integral health, soundness of mind, body and soul. Such an approach is lame duck since it values concrete solutions and statistics. It may not form part of the answers to questions chronically ill persons are liable to ask such as why is it me who is not responding to this particular conventional medical treatment.

Modern conventional Western medicine has somewhat restricted itself to the empirical aspects of experimentation and verification in contrast to the African traditional medicine which has a holistic approach. Integral development rejects the reduction of human life to merely quantitative categories. This integral development cannot come only through human efforts, though they are indispensable as well. Jesus Christ has given a transcendent aim to human efforts for the common good. The socio-cultural contexts which foster that aim are to be appraised and utilized.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. J.A.R. WEMBAH, "Is Culture in South-Eastern Tanzania Development-Unfriendly?" in *The Making of a Periphery: Economic Development and Cultural Encounters in Southern Tanzania*, ed. Pekka Seppälä and Bertha Koda (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainsstitut, 1998), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Kwame GYEKYE, *Tradition and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 248.

<sup>17</sup> See the Special Feature carried by *Saturday Nation*, Nairobi, December 9, 2006, "Traditional Medicine: Methods of Head Surgery," 22–23.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. John MBITI, *Introduction to African Religion* (Ibadan, Nairobi, London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975), 165.

In his article “The African Family in Development Crisis in the Second Millennium,”<sup>19</sup> Ocholla Ayayo writes that culture in traditional societies had six foundational tasks common to all human societies. For Ocholla Ayayo, culture is linked with sustainable development whose functions are the following: i) aiming at maintaining biological continuity of members of the society; by implanting norms and values of marriage and family institutions; ii) aiming at education and socialization of young members to enable them to graduate into mature adults; iii) aiming at defining and maintaining ethics and ethical principles, law and order; iv) maintaining life’s meaning; v) this meaning in life is meant for organizing productions, distributions and consumption as well as providing social services, organizing norms for division of labour, knowledge, skills and tools for exploiting natural resources; it is also meant to organize human population in their respective locations into functional groups by providing them with language; vi) providing institutions for judging rights and wrongs.

The above functions of culture are encompassing almost all major aspects (if not all) of human development in any society at least in Africa. A deficiency at any stage is the source of under development. Even the modern developments have to take over effectively traditional functions of culture. The way forward in integral development is to combine the good cultural elements in African culture with the best of Western, Oriental, American cultures. Alienation is anti-development.

#### APPROACHES FROM INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF AFRICAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL HERITAGE AND VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS

Elochukwu distinguishes two orientations in the on-going inculturation quest particularly in Africa. There is the non-systematic and the systematic orientations. The non-systematic refers to the more functional aspects of liturgy which include music, liturgical art and architecture.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand the systematic approach in the words of Elochukwu, “Starts from a purposeful awareness in a local Church that its grasp of the reality of Jesus the

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<sup>19</sup> A.B.C. OCHOLLA-AYAYO, “The African Family in Development Crisis in the Second Millennium,” *The African Anthropologist*, 7 (2000), 1: 84–85.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Eugene E. UZUKWU, “Liturgy Truly Christian and Truly African,” in *Spearhead*, no. 74 (Eldoret: Gaba Publications, 1982), 31–36.

Christ in the context of Africa has become or is becoming less intelligible than it should be, because translated in alien theological language, expressed in alien-and so, esoteric-words and gestures.”<sup>21</sup>

My personal experience allows me to suggest that the two dominant trends in the systematic school of theological thought in Africa are inculturation and liberation trends which actually are like the two sides of a coin. The Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) in Nairobi, Kenya as well as its constituent colleges particularly Tangaza University College, School of Theology among others are examples of Catholic Theological Institutes involved in the systematic creativity. However, it is regrettable how many unpublished theses and dissertations on inculturation lie inaccessible to the larger public readership in the libraries of these institutes.

According to the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 1995, “The Catholic Universities and Higher Institutes in Africa have a prominent role to play in the proclamation of the salvific Word of God. They are a sign of the growth of the Church insofar as their research integrates the truths and experiences of the faith and helps to internalize them.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed according to the Exhortation, these Catholic Higher Institutes will be faithful to their service to the Church when they study significant theological and social questions for the Church’s well being, by developing an African theology, by promoting the work of inculturation especially in liturgical celebrative praxis, by publishing books and indeed by a scientific contribution to the study and articulation of cultures.<sup>23</sup>

Tangaza University College offers a course on African theology.<sup>24</sup> This is of great benefit not only to the entire School of Theology but also to the entire college and the larger society. Surely most of these students will eventually engage in ministry in Africa. To address the soul of their audiences, it will be incumbent upon them to appeal to their hearts and minds in a language articulated in the African genius for more effectiveness. *Ecclesia in Africa* recounts that “In Africa, where *oral transmission* is one of the characteristics of culture, such training is of capital importance.”<sup>25</sup> The people of God are to be trained to preach the Word of God both by speaking and acting.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>22</sup> *Ecclesia in Africa*, No. 103.

<sup>23</sup> *Cf. ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> See Tangaza College, School of Theology, *Revised Academic Handbook*, Nairobi, 2010–2011.

<sup>25</sup> *Ecclesia in Africa*, No. 71.



Inculturation is the continuing quest so that the transformative presence of God is not only signified but also manifested. The overriding concern is not only religious but even more the humanization of the world. Christ entered into the world to give witness to the truth, to save and not condemn it.<sup>26</sup>

An attempt at a false dichotomy between culture and 'other' public life must be rejected as a project detrimental to authentic human development. This false binary segmentation is unhealthy. It is a recipe for secularization. African theologians of different orientations of schools of thought are today engaged in theological dialogue among themselves also in the various theological institutes. Their mission is a great and noble one in the service of inculturation. They have already begun to propose an African reading of the mystery of Christ. The concepts of Church-as-Family, Church-as-Brotherhood, are fruits of their work in contact with the Christian experience of the People of God in Africa.<sup>27</sup>

Oliana writes: "Tangaza School of Theology is now hosting the office of coordination of the Association of Theological Institutions of Eastern Africa (ATIEA). We hope to be able to start an intriguing adventure of cooperation and mutual animation at least at the level of theological exchange."<sup>28</sup> In addition it can be hoped that the recently inaugurated Department of Research, Tangaza University College will reinforce the theological exchange agenda as well, albeit at intellectual level overtly and at other existential levels covertly.

Moreover in a fast evolving world, schools, cultural and research centres, institutes and universities are the privileged places where societies must adapt to the international context. Hence Catholic theological institutes in Africa must define African culture(s) in which they operate so as to find points of contact with other cultures.<sup>29</sup>

These African theologians and their theological institutes' context must foster the *four-fold dialogue* recommended by the Church, namely, the dialogue of life where people strive to live in a neighbourly spirit, the dialogue of action, whereby Christians and others collaborate for integral development and liberation of people, dialogue of religious experience,

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. II SYNOD OF BISHOPS, SPECIAL ASSEMBLY FOR AFRICA, Message *The Church in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Guido OLIANA, "The Theological Challenges of Religious Pluralism: Towards a Christian Theology of Other Faiths," *Tangaza Journal of Theology and Mission*, 2010, 1: 15.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. II SYNOD OF BISHOPS, SPECIAL ASSEMBLY FOR AFRICA, Message, No. 53.

where people rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual heritages, the dialogue of theological exchange, where experts seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious traditions.<sup>30</sup>

In the Catholic theological institutes, it is incumbent upon these institutes under the guidance of those directly responsible for academic vibrancy, to have important debates take place about culture, ethics, future directions for politics and economics.

#### THEOLOGY AS INCULTURATED PRAXIS

Whereas the Church by its very nature and mission is universal and thus not bound to any one culture<sup>31</sup>, it acknowledges the pluralism of new forms of culture.<sup>32</sup> For instance, there is the universal phenomenon of urbanization which quite often leads to uprootedness even cultural wise, mass unemployment and hence the masses and cultures are impoverished. However, no culture should be marginalized by the inculturation agenda.

The aim is not to secularize or water down the message of Jesus Christ by merely accommodating it to *any* spirit of the times. The inculturation or liberation hermeneutical principles in African theology must aim at translating the Gospel message in a meaningful way to the contemporary African Christian. After giving the principles of interpretation, African theologians should commit themselves to promoting the genuine aspirations of people in a given culture to encounter the Gospel without being alienated from their culture. Theology as done in Catholic theological institutes in Africa should spur people to discover the limits of immanence and the human necessity of transcendence.

Vatican II, in its document Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, observes:

So too indeed, just as happened in the economy of the incarnation, the young Churches which are rooted in Christ and built on the foundations of the apostles, take over all the riches of the nations which have been given to Christ as an inheritance. They borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching,

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND CONGREGATION FOR THE EVANGELIZATION OF PEOPLES, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interrreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 1991, No. 42.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 42.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 53.

arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator, manifest the grace of the Saviour, or contribute to the right ordering of Christian life.<sup>33</sup>

So, indeed faith is to be explained in terms of the philosophy and wisdom of the people. Permanent values in African traditional cultures are to be integrated into the Christian praxis. What must be avoided are syncretism (attempt to reconcile incompatible elements) and false particularism or sectarianism.

The Decree on the Training of Priests *Optatam Totius*, clearly indicates that in the theological institutes, theology should be taught with due regard to the conditions of different countries.<sup>34</sup> This obviously implies the socio-cultural, political and even economical realities. This is the issue of cultural pluralism. What is therefore required is to interpret and reinterpret doctrines in the light of the various cultural contexts in the endeavour to make the world more and more humane, to engage in integral development.

#### CONCLUSION

Catholic theological institutes in Africa should continue to conscientize their students on the important role culture plays in holistic development. There can be no definitive conclusion to inculturated praxis. It is an ongoing quest. Evangelization is to be carried on by the agents of the same up to the end of the ages (*cf.* Mt 28:20). Only inculturation realized by local Churches can bring about the transformation of the universal Church and civil society. The fruit of inculturated praxis is the birth, rebirth and escalation of Christian ecclesial communities and the civil society.

Catholic theological institutes and theological reflection have to take seriously the socio-cultural situations in which the faithful and theologians live, think and act. Therefore such a contact with concrete socio-cultural situations in the light of Gospel values at different levels can bring about greater service to humanity. Hence inculturated praxis is a recipe for integral renewal. The good seed is in the hand of Catholic theological institutes. Its broadcasting is a human operation assisted by divine impulse. Various cultures contain a value of their own yet errors can also be found in them. When there is a meeting between the divine and human, there takes place the grand pilgrimage to transcend human cultural limitations.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, No. 22.

<sup>34</sup> *Optatam Totius*, No. 16.

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TEORETYCZNE DYSKUSJE O INKULTURACJI  
NA RZECZ TRANSFORMUJĄCEJ EWANGELIZACJI

## Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł zagłębia się dynamikę kultury w duchowych, społecznych i materialnych aspektach egzystencji człowieka. Kultura jest antropologicznym elementem w teologii. Koncepcja kultury jest nierozzerwalnie związana z zasadą zrównoważonego rozwoju, którego założenia obejmują między innymi edukację i uspołecznienie młodych członków społeczeństwa celem umożliwienia im osiągnięcia dojrzałości. Autor w swoim eseju analizuje zadanie inkulturacy i jej rolę w przeciwstawianiu wszelkich objawów dyskryminacji. Teologiczną podstawą inkulturacy jest tajemnica Wcieleniem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** inkulturacy; kultura; kultura Afryki; rozwój.