

TOWARD A SYNODAL CHURCH IN AFRICA

Echoes from an African
Christian Palaver



Ikenna U. Okafor ▪ Josée Ngalula
Nicholaus Segeja ▪ Stan Chu Ilo
editors

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

General Introduction

Ikenna U. Okafor

What initially began as a preparation for a Synod of Bishops on Synodality gradually, and one would say positively, metamorphosed into a global synodal process involving all the faithful in a journey to develop a new ecclesial lifestyle that will guide the Church of the twenty-first century. This process is not better understood by an intellectual definition, but rather through the mutual and fraternal engagement of Christians with one another and at all levels in charting the course of the Church's mission in contemporary society. The synodal approach which Pope Francis is promoting through this process is one that has awakened a lot of enthusiasm among Catholics all over the world, and one that will redefine our way of being Church. It is an approach that is characterised by deep involvement such as speaking out, listening with interest, and being open to the novelty of the Spirit. Inspired by the Holy Spirit who is the driver of this process, many African theologians and pastoral agents gathered in Nairobi, Kenya from 18th to 23rd July 2022 with their colleagues from all parts of the world to discuss among other things, the theme of synodality. The Congress, which was akin to a family discussion, received the blessings of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, through a video message. It also enjoyed the cordial encouragement of the Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, His Eminence Mario Cardinal Grech, who acknowledged that "the religious, cultural and philosophical traditions of Africa have rich examples, resources, values and practices that correlate with the concept of synodality."¹ The treasures of the African traditions are precious

¹ Grech, Mario Cardinal, "Message to African Theologians Meeting at Nairobi", 17.

gifts which the continent does not hesitate to present to the universal Church with joy and pride. The essays published in this volume are the academic fruits of that synodal encounter in Nairobi.

African Christians feel happy about the African cultural heritage which are believed to have the potentials of immensely enriching the Church's mission and Christian practice beyond the boundaries of the African continent. And one of those invaluable cultural goods with which Africa is blessed is the traditional practice of reaching communal consensus through a process of participatory dialogue widely known as palaver. This tradition is known to provide many African communities the social climate for maintaining justice, peace and harmony, and for promoting sound ethical choices for human and cosmic flourishing. It is a practice that is so widespread in Africa and known under various designations, like *shikome* among the Sukuma people of Tanzania, *baraza/indaba* in South Africa, *enkiguena* among the Maasai of East Africa, *ìbòrì ùka*² among the Igbo of West Africa, etc. In fact, from their earliest contact with missionary evangelisation, the Igbo people designate Christians as *ndị ùka* (which literary means the palaver people), and the Church or liturgical assembly is known as *ùka*. Sunday is translated as *ùbòchì ùka* and the church building as *ùlò ùka*, which mean 'the palaver-day' and 'house of palaver' respectively. So intimately was the practice of palaver associated with the identity of the Church from earliest missionary days that it has become imperative to explore deeper into this African cultural heritage and its connection with Christian culture, and to find ways of appropriating its theological and pastoral potentials for the good of the Church in the modern world. The contributions in this volume are committed to such a creative appropriation. The methodology cuts across field researches and analyses, inductive reasonings about the efficacy of palaver, phenomenological hermeneutic of cultural literature,

² See Stan Chu Ilo, "Exploring the Possible Contributions" in page 85 below.

biblical exegesis, and case study methods, which give this work a rainbow colour of diversity and richness.

As the entire Church journeys on a pilgrimage with eyes on the Church's missionary horizon, eager to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church at this moment, theologians and pastoral agents in Africa are confident that the African perspective to synodality will be crucial and beneficial to the life of the Church. The peculiar history of Africa's missionary experience and the inclusion which the practice of synodality compels, combine to make Africa's voices akin to voices from the manger, "because there was no room for them in the inn" (cf. *Lk 2:7*). The inclusion of Africa in the world of the third millennium is the challenge not only of the Church but also of the entire human community. As African scholars grapple with the nuances and lived experiences and challenges of synodality, they only echo the many marginalised voices of the African humanity that are yearning to be heard and acknowledged. The essays are developed from different backgrounds which includes interdisciplinary hermeneutics that are relevant to the theology and pastoral life of the Church in Africa. The diverse perspectives that are articulated in this volume reflect the hope of African people and the actions of the Holy Spirit who enkindles that hope and turns it into a transformative energy for the work of building God's kingdom. All these perspectives enrich the synodal conversation on the building of a new culture in the Church, a culture that will become a leaven of inclusive humanism for the whole world.

As we turn the chapter pages, John Okoye leads us through a lived experience of synodality as a diocesan Bishop, highlighting the potentials of a local Church to unlock the evangelical energy of young people, especially when mutual collaborations are unified, visions are clear, goals set, and practical applications are widespread. Paulin Poucouta then recapitulates biblical literature, where we contemplate the ancestral legacy of Abraham whose weaknesses, doubts, turpitude, and family saga, did not overshadow his steadfastness in walking with Yahweh.

Abraham's calling and life are thus presented as a witness of a daily adventure with a God who constantly leads us beyond our familiar borders. Abraham's example is showcased as a lesson for all lay men and women to help them discover the importance of their own calling.

From a Latin American perspective, Emilce Cuda underscores the point that any authentic contemporary theology must be a political theology of the people. That is, a theology that promotes grassroot organisation that challenges the imperialism of liberal capitalism. Such a theology must not be content with an "option for the poor" which stops at giving the poor food handouts without giving them a signature in the decision-making process. The theology of the people is then further explored from an ecclesiological point of view by Stan Chu Ilo who investigates the theological developments on synodality between the Second Vatican Council and Pope Francis and some of the contributions of the reforms of Pope Francis to synodality in the Church. He introduces the African palaver as a model for participatory dialogue that could contribute to promoting consensus-building and inclusiveness in the Roman Catholic Church. Josée Ngalula, on her part, draws insight from African social anthropology which is expressed in the spirituality of Ubuntu. She attributes the success of African ecclesiology (both in theory and practice) to this spirituality of communion which underlies the structure of Small Christian Communities (SCC), where mutual respect and promotion of the human dignity of the other are primarily cultivated.

In chapter six, Ikenna Okafor steers the conversation into a discourse in interdisciplinary terrain which x-rays the postcolonial narrative of Chinua Achebe in his *Arrow of God*, a novel that articulates the intimate bond between the priesthood and the religion as well as the intricate web of interdependency between the deity, the priest, and the people in any religion. Okafor's interdisciplinary hermeneutic warns of the danger posed by clericalism in obscuring the culture of "walking together" and

thereby undermining the mission of the Church. It also argues for the relevance of African literatures as important sources of theological deposits and loci of divine inspiration that are hitherto insufficiently explored by academic theology in Africa.

In chapter seven, Nicholas Segeja argues for how the involvement of the laity in doing theology can promote synodality for new evangelisation, especially in Africa. Segeja contends that the articulation of the social dimension of ecclesial synodality subsisting in the practice of reverential dialogue is capable of activating a process of conversion toward a renewed way of evangelisation in Africa. And this can better be achieved if the laity becomes more involved in the production of theological knowledge. He proposes that an orientation and focus in theology which accommodates the secular character of the laity should be encouraged, especially in relation to some key areas of the apostolate in the life of the Church, like education, health care and information technology.

In chapter eight, Raymond Aina raised questions and made recommendations about how to deal with contested moral issues. According to Aina, the contestations which centre on the tensions between sin and conscience—between objective good and lesser evil arguments; between pragmatism (what works) and normativity (what's given); or the hermeneutical clash on given doctrinal positions—concern important moral, social, and political decisions. In exploring the tensions, it is important to know how to navigate our way together through an atmosphere of toxic emotions when we passionately disagree on moral grounds. Two case studies involving the children of an orphanage and students of a major seminary reveal how important it is to all respondents to identify with a Church of communion that promotes equal opportunities and practices accompaniment. Aina's study is followed by an experiment carried out in the parish of Sainte-Trinité in the archdiocese of Kinshasa (DR Congo) which centres on the significance of the role of the laity in active evangelisation. In line with the decolonisation of theological knowledge and

the co-construction of knowledge in the sense of a *pastorale d'engendrement*, Ignace Ndongala reports how a synodal shift from a monological authority of interpretation of the Word of God to a polyphonic praxis in homiletics in tune with the culture of palaver and fraternal dialogue associated with a Church–Family of God has yielded good results at the grassroot level of the Basic Christian Communities.

Finally, Francis Appiah-Kubi appreciates the Synod on Synodality as a *Kairos moment of grace* for the Church in Africa to critically re-examine herself and her internal mechanisms. He identifies five key lessons which the African Church can draw from the process. These include the need for good formation of agents of evangelisation; rethinking the hierarchical ministry to involve active sacramental participation of the laity; promoting vocation and responsibility of lay faithful; encouraging a synodal ecumenical learning process; and rejecting all ideologies of exclusion, like ethnicism or racism while affirming unity in diversity in the Church–Family of God. What is not clear, however, is the level of sacramental participation that will satisfy the desires of those who believe that the laity are not sufficiently included in the pastoral ministry of the Church. Herein lies one of the major challenges of the synodal process. But we hope that this is a challenge that can be turned into an opportunity for progress in the Church.

The humble contributions of the African Church which are reflected in this volume surely do not exhaust the perspectives from the numerous African voices that are engaged with this theme. But even without pretensions of offering a silver bullet against the problems associated with synodality, this work will help seminarians, theologians, and pastoral agents in the work of evangelisation in Africa. Its findings and recommendations will remain an important driver of theological and pastoral debates on the path to achieving a better and more inclusive approach in the ecclesial pilgrimage of the People of God in our time. It is expected to animate the praxis of synodality in Africa with vision and orientation in many levels.