

Ubuntu as a Lived Pathway to Religious Inculturation in Liberia: Reclaiming Indigenous Faith, Strengthening Christian Identity, and Revitalizing African Heritage in the Modern Era

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Abstract: This paper re-examines Ubuntu as a lived ethical and spiritual framework that can support religious inculturation in Liberia by integrating Indigenous African religious values with Christian faith in a meaningful and culturally grounded way. In many African contexts, including Liberia, modern religious life is shaped by historical encounters with Christianity and Islam, often introduced through missionary and colonial systems. While these traditions have contributed to education and moral formation, they have also, in some cases, weakened Indigenous expressions of spirituality and cultural religious ownership (Mbiti, 1990). This study argues that Ubuntu, understood as “I am because we are”, is not only a philosophical idea but a practical way of living faith in community. It provides a framework for rebuilding religious identity in Liberia through dialogue between Christianity and Indigenous African spirituality. Ubuntu promotes inculturation, where Christian faith is not detached from African culture but expressed through it in worship, ethics, leadership, and community life. The paper further demonstrates that when Ubuntu is lived in church life, education, and community structures, it strengthens moral formation, social cohesion, cultural dignity, and spiritual authenticity. It concludes that Ubuntu-based inculturation offers a sustainable pathway for restoring African religious identity while deepening Christian faith in a way that is both contextual and transformative.

Keywords: Ubuntu, religious inculturation, Indigenous African religion, Christianity in Africa, Liberia, cultural identity.

1. Introduction

Religion in Liberia plays a central role in shaping identity, morality, leadership, and community life. Christianity, in particular, has become deeply rooted through missionary activity, church education systems, and national public life. However, this historical development has also created ongoing tensions between Christian expressions of faith and Indigenous Liberian spiritual worldviews, many of which remain embedded in communal ethics, rituals, and cultural identity (Sanneh, 2003).

Although Christianity has made significant contributions to education, health care, and moral teaching, its practice in some contexts has also raised concerns about cultural disconnection

and theological interpretation. In particular, there is growing debate within African Christian communities regarding certain contemporary theological and social interpretations introduced through global missionary and denominational networks. One of the most sensitive issues is the increasing advocacy in some international church circles for acceptance of same-sex relationships as part of Christian life and ministry.

For many African societies, including Liberia, such positions are widely perceived as being in tension with both traditional African moral frameworks and conservative biblical interpretations that emphasize marriage between a man and a woman as the foundational structure of family and society (Genesis 2:24; Romans 1:26–27). As a result, these emerging theological debates have contributed to discomfort and resistance among many African Christian communities, who view such teachings as culturally incongruent and spiritually contested within their local context.

This situation highlights a broader concern: the need for African churches to exercise theological discernment, contextual interpretation, and religious self-understanding rather than uncritical adoption of external cultural and doctrinal trends. It also reinforces the importance of religious inculturation, where faith is expressed in ways that remain faithful to Scripture while also being authentically rooted in African cultural and moral realities.

In response to these challenges, the concept of Ubuntu offers a contextual framework for religious inculturation, particularly in Liberia where Christianity and Indigenous traditions coexist in lived experience. Ubuntu emphasizes that humanity is relational and that identity is formed through community, shared values, and mutual responsibility (Tutu, 1999). It therefore provides a foundation for rethinking religion not as competing systems, but as a shared moral and spiritual journey rooted in African life, dignity, and communal ethics.

2. Understanding Ubuntu as a Lived African Reality

Ubuntu is a deeply rooted African worldview that is found

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across many African societies, including West, East, and Southern Africa. It is commonly expressed in the idea that *a person becomes a person through other people*. This means that human identity is not understood as individual and independent, but as communal, relational, and shaped through shared life, responsibility, and mutual dependence (Mbiti, 1990).

In practical life, Ubuntu is not merely a theory or philosophical idea; it is a lived ethical reality. It shapes how people greet one another, share resources, resolve conflicts, and participate in community life. In Ubuntu-based societies, social harmony is not optional but essential for survival and wellbeing. This is because the wellbeing of the individual is directly connected to the wellbeing of the community (Tutu, 1999). In this sense, morality is not only personal but deeply social and communal.

Ubuntu also provides a framework for understanding authority, leadership, and moral accountability. Leaders are expected to act in ways that promote unity, justice, and collective wellbeing rather than personal gain. This aligns with traditional African ethical systems where leadership was viewed as service to the community rather than domination over it (Mbiti, 1990; Tutu, 1999).

At the same time, Ubuntu carries a strong spiritual dimension. It affirms the sacredness of life, respect for human dignity, and recognition of divine presence within human relationships. It also resonates with Indigenous African religious understandings of life, where spirituality is not separated from daily existence but is embedded within it. In many African worldviews, including Liberia, the spiritual, social, and moral dimensions of life are deeply interconnected (Bediako, 1995).

In this way, Ubuntu becomes more than cultural philosophy; it becomes a holistic worldview that unites faith, ethics, and community life. This makes it particularly relevant for religious inculturation, where faith is not imposed externally but expressed through local cultural identity and lived experience.

3. Religious Inculturation and Indigenous African Spiritual Identity in Liberia

Religious inculturation refers to the process through which faith is expressed within the cultural, social, and historical realities of a people without losing its essential spiritual meaning. In Liberia, this process is especially important because Indigenous African spiritual worldviews have long shaped moral values, family systems, leadership structures, and community identity.

Indigenous African religions in Liberia are characterized by belief in a Supreme Being, reverence for ancestors, recognition of the sacredness of nature, and strong emphasis on moral responsibility within the community. These beliefs are not abstract theological ideas but are lived through rituals, oral traditions, naming ceremonies, festivals, and everyday ethical behavior (Mbiti, 1990). In this sense, spirituality is integrated into all aspects of life.

However, during the colonial and missionary periods, Christianity was often introduced in ways that did not fully engage African cultural and spiritual frameworks. As a result,

in some contexts, Christianity was experienced as a system that replaced rather than transformed Indigenous religious identity. Bediako (1995) argues that this historical process sometimes created a divide between formal Christian practice and lived African spirituality, leading to weakened religious ownership and cultural disconnection.

In addition, contemporary religious life in Africa, including Liberia, is sometimes influenced by global theological trends that may not always align with local cultural and biblical interpretations. This has contributed to ongoing debates within African churches about contextual theology, moral values, and cultural identity. Many African Christian communities emphasize that faith must remain grounded in both biblical teaching and cultural integrity, rather than being shaped solely by external ideological influences (Sanneh, 2003).

Ubuntu offers a corrective and constructive framework for addressing this challenge. It affirms that African spirituality is not separate from African identity but is deeply rooted in communal life, shared values, and moral responsibility. It also supports the idea that faith should be interpreted and lived in ways that reflect the cultural realities of African people.

In the Liberian context, this means that Christianity and Indigenous spiritual heritage can engage in meaningful dialogue rather than competition. Through inculturation, Christian faith can be expressed in ways that respect African cultural identity while remaining faithful to its spiritual foundations. This approach allows religion to become truly owned, lived, and experienced by the people, rather than externally defined.

Religious ownership in this sense means that Liberians are not passive receivers of religious systems but active participants in shaping how faith is understood, expressed, and practiced within their cultural environment.

4. Ubuntu as a Bridge Between Christianity and Indigenous Faith in Liberia

In Liberia today, Christianity remains the dominant religion, especially through the influence of mainline churches such as Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal traditions. However, despite this strong Christian presence, many communities continue to hold Indigenous cultural and spiritual understandings that shape how people interpret life events, morality, healing, family relations, and community wellbeing. These lived realities show that religion in Liberia is not experienced in isolation but within a complex interaction of Christian faith and Indigenous worldviews.

Instead of treating Christianity and Indigenous African spirituality as opposing or competing systems, Ubuntu provides a relational and integrative framework that allows both to be understood within a shared moral universe. Ubuntu emphasizes that human life is interconnected, and therefore spiritual truth must also be expressed in ways that build community, promote dignity, and sustain social harmony (Tutu, 1999). This makes Ubuntu a powerful bridge for dialogue between Christianity and African traditional values.

When Christianity is interpreted through the lens of Ubuntu, it becomes more relational, communal, and socially engaged.

Core Christian teachings such as love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and service gain deeper meaning when expressed within African communal life. These values strongly align with Ubuntu principles of shared humanity and mutual responsibility, creating a natural convergence between Christian ethics and African moral philosophy (Tutu, 1999; Sanneh, 2003).

Bediako (1995) argues that African Christianity reaches full maturity when it is not separated from African identity but is rooted within it. Ubuntu strengthens this insight by encouraging forms of Christian expression that respect African cultural realities while remaining faithful to biblical teaching. This does not mean replacing Christianity, but rather contextualizing it in a way that makes it fully lived and fully African.

In Liberia, this integrative approach is already visible in various church practices. Community-based worship styles often include African musical expressions, rhythmic participation, and collective engagement that reflect communal spirituality. Storytelling in preaching also plays an important role, as it connects biblical messages to African oral traditions and lived experiences. Communal prayer practices further reinforce the sense of shared faith and collective responsibility.

Moreover, churches in Liberia are actively involved in conflict resolution, reconciliation, and peacebuilding, especially in post-war contexts where healing is essential. These roles reflect Ubuntu values in action, where faith is not only doctrinal but also practical and restorative. In this way, inculturation becomes a lived reality, where Christianity is expressed through African cultural identity rather than being detached from it.

5. Ubuntu and Moral Renewal in Liberian Society

Liberia, like many African countries, continues to face significant moral and social challenges. These include corruption in public institutions, weak systems of accountability, increasing youth disconnection from communal life, and a growing sense of individualism that undermines traditional values of responsibility and solidarity. These challenges highlight the need for a renewed ethical framework that speaks to both cultural identity and modern realities.

Ubuntu offers such a framework by placing community wellbeing at the center of moral life. In Ubuntu philosophy, ethical behavior is not defined solely by personal gain or individual rights, but by the impact of one's actions on the wider community. This perspective encourages a shift from self-centeredness to collective responsibility, where individuals understand that their wellbeing is inseparable from the wellbeing of others (Tutu, 1999).

Within an Ubuntu-based society, leadership is understood as service rather than power. Leaders are expected to act as custodians of justice, fairness, and communal welfare. This understanding resonates strongly with both African traditional leadership models and Christian servant leadership teachings, which emphasize humility, accountability, and care for the vulnerable (Tutu, 1999; Sanneh, 2003).

When Ubuntu values are integrated into churches, schools, and community institutions in Liberia, they promote honesty,

integrity, and responsibility. People are encouraged to see themselves as part of a larger social body where individual actions have communal consequences. This awareness fosters ethical behavior in public life, strengthens trust in institutions, and promotes social cohesion.

Therefore, Ubuntu becomes not only a cultural philosophy but also a moral renewal framework that can support national transformation in Liberia by addressing both personal and institutional ethics.

6. Ubuntu and the Preservation of African Heritage in Liberia

African heritage in Liberia is rich and diverse, expressed through languages, oral traditions, music, dance, rituals, kinship systems, and communal celebrations. These cultural expressions are not merely artistic forms but are deeply connected to identity, spirituality, and moral life. However, globalization, modernization, and cultural homogenization have increasingly threatened the continuity of some of these traditions.

Ubuntu plays a critical role in the preservation of African heritage by affirming that culture is not separate from spirituality but is an essential part of how people understand life, community, and God. In Ubuntu thought, cultural practices are not seen as outdated or inferior but as valuable expressions of communal wisdom and identity (Mbiti, 1990).

One of the key strengths of Ubuntu is its respect for elders as custodians of wisdom and memory. Elders are seen as living links between the past and present, carrying knowledge that shapes identity and moral direction. Ubuntu also values oral tradition as a legitimate source of historical and spiritual knowledge, ensuring that community stories, proverbs, and teachings are preserved and passed on to future generations.

Furthermore, communal rituals and celebrations are understood as expressions of unity and shared meaning. These practices reinforce belonging, strengthen social bonds, and maintain continuity between generations. When integrated into religious life, they help ensure that African heritage remains active and meaningful rather than being replaced by foreign cultural expressions.

When Ubuntu is embraced within Christian communities in Liberia, it allows African heritage to exist alongside Christian faith in a complementary rather than competing relationship. This creates a balanced identity, where individuals can fully embrace Christianity while also remaining deeply rooted in their African cultural heritage.

7. Conclusion

Ubuntu provides a meaningful and practical framework for religious inculturation in Liberia, where Indigenous African spirituality and Christian faith can exist in a mutually enriching and life-giving relationship. Rather than allowing religion to remain a tension between imported traditions and local cultural realities, Ubuntu offers a way of re-centering faith within African communal life, where spirituality is experienced, interpreted, and lived through relationships, shared values, and

social responsibility (Mbiti, 1990; Tutu, 1999).

Through this framework, Ubuntu supports the restoration of religious ownership, where African people are not passive receivers of external theological systems but active participants in shaping how faith is understood and practiced. This approach aligns with Bediako's (1995) argument that African Christianity must emerge from within African identity in order to be fully authentic and transformative. In this sense, inculturation becomes not an academic idea but a lived reality within families, churches, schools, and communities. Ubuntu strengthens moral responsibility and communal ethics in Liberian society. It encourages accountability, justice, compassion, and shared responsibility, all of which are essential for addressing contemporary social challenges such as corruption, weak governance, and youth disconnection. At the same time, it deepens spiritual life by reconnecting faith to the everyday realities of African people, ensuring that religion remains relevant, relational, and transformative (Sanneh, 2003).

Furthermore, Ubuntu plays a critical role in preserving African heritage in a rapidly globalizing world. It affirms that cultural identity is not separate from spirituality but is an essential expression of how African people understand God, community, and humanity. This helps to safeguard language, oral traditions, rituals, and communal practices that might otherwise be weakened by cultural homogenization and external influences (Mbiti, 1990).

In the Liberian context, this approach contributes to building a society that is not only religiously vibrant but also culturally rooted and ethically grounded. It fosters unity between faith and

culture, encouraging churches and communities to engage in dialogue rather than division, and to embrace a holistic understanding of spirituality that reflects African lived experience.

Ultimately, Ubuntu reminds African societies that faith is most powerful when it is lived in community, shaped by culture, and directed toward the common good. It calls for a renewed vision of religion in Liberia, one that is both deeply Christian and authentically African, rooted in love, justice, and shared humanity.

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