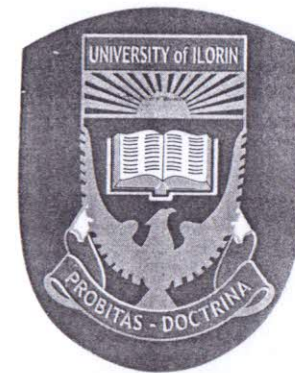


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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Names and Naming Characters in the Dramaturgy of Yoruba Writers <i>Akintunde Akinyemi</i>	1
Hausa Language: Globalisation and the Internet <i>Mohammed M. Munkaila</i>	24
A Critique of Abu-Riyyah's Technique of Matn Analysis <i>Imam Abubakr Ya'qub</i>	45
An Ecumenical Interpretation of Ezekiel 37:15-28 in Relation to the Unity of Christians in Nigeria <i>Rotimi Omotoye</i>	56
A Speech Act Analysis of <i>Alaroye</i> Headlines on Abacha's Death <i>Hezekiah O. Adeosun & Taofiq A. Alabi</i>	70
The Implications of Ecumenism in Nigerian Church <i>Glory Akiti Alamu</i>	87
The Influence of Globalization on Isa Alabi's Subaa'inyyat (Poetry) <i>Lateef Onireti Ibraheem</i>	105
A Study of the Features of Sulaiman Adebayo's Poetry <i>Abdulganij Abimbola Abdussalam</i>	112
Ascetic Poem of Shaykh Adam Abdullahi Al-Ilori: An Analytical Study <i>Khalil Mohammad Gbodofu</i>	120
Towards Successful Organization and Management of Hajj Operations in Nigeria <i>Badmas O. Yusuf</i>	127
Analytical Study of Ambiguous and Common Names in the Qur'an <i>N. I. Raji</i>	142
A Syntactic Analysis of the Language of Outdoor Advertisements <i>Boianie Elizabeth Arokoyo</i>	150
An Appraisal of the Content and Style of Shawqi's Versified Fables <i>Prof. Z. I. Oseni</i>	169

THE IMPLICATIONS OF ECUMENISM IN NIGERIAN CHURCH

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Abstract

Unity, so precious to the contemporary minds, is by no means geared towards eliminating individuality, dividedness, disunity and 'isms'. The fissions and separations within Christendom have slowed down germane progress as a result of unpleasant Christianity. Thus, this contorted Christianity lurked the bodies of Christ for centuries. It therefore becomes imperative to arrest this awful and skewed situation of individuality and dividedness which has been the bane in Christendom. However, the unifying dynamism of the contemporary minds seeks for a whole, a co-operative oneness, a synthetic whole hence ecumenism. Ecumenism speaks of communion as the rule than union as the exception. Apart from this, ecumenism is to remove absolutist language that has for so long coloured Christian consciousness and witness. One of the highest goods Christians can strive for is to promote an authentic, intra-cultural dialogue that will enable all Christians genuinely search for and discover truth in its inexhaustible richness and to cooperate ever more effectively in removing the suffering, human disunity and individualism that is devastating Christian community. It is in the light of the foregoing that this paper seeks to aptly explore ecumenism in Nigerian Church. The study will give a cursory and critical treatment of the implications of ecumenism in Nigerian Church which is the focus of attention.

Introduction

Etymologically, ecumenism is a Greek derivative *Oikoumene* which originally meant the 'inhabited World' consisting

of island and continents.¹ Thus, the term ecumenism at inception has a geographical connotation than theological meaning or interpretation. Over the centuries there was an undiminished quest for a synthetic unity in Christendom, hence the term ecumenism had to be straggled to cover the 'inhabited world' of the Christian bodies.

Theologically speaking 'ecumenism is the movement among the Christian churches for the recovery of their visible and institutional unity'.³ To buttress this definition further, *lexicon universal Encyclopedia* defines ecumenism as

the term used to describe the search for fuller unity that has been a notable feature of life and work of Christian churches in the 20th century. It is a movement that embraces many organization and individuals and cannot properly be identified with any single body.⁴

It is notably observed that the "inhabited world" depicts the collective efforts of all Christians to manifest the unity of the church in faith, profession and common service for the world unflaggingly. Thus, unity is not only in itself the object and leeway for ecumenism, but also an unbounded and immutable relationship between two historical terminals of unity and mission on the one hand and how unity can be restored fully to the churches, so as to have a common front. In other words, ecumenism permeates a powerful impetus towards greater unity among Christians and its primary impulse is the world-wide unity and co-operation among all Christian churches.⁵ This unity can be either a spiritual reality apart from organisation of men-as evangelicals are inclined to argue or an effort to create some federation of churches or some merger of denominations'.⁶ In fact, the consciousness of unity via ecumenism was necessitated consequent upon the 'isms', contradictions, sins of prejudice, denominational schism, ecclesiastical powers, numerous survival

pranks, rationalization, holier-than thou postures which have created and still create tensions in Christendom. These paradoxes facilitated ecumenism which is a movement towards greater inclusiveness; its intention is to bring together, in active participation, in the one body, those who would otherwise be separated in some ways. Put differently, the movement towards unity is also a movement towards fuller participation.⁷ In sum, ecumenism is a movement which transcends division, creed, denominational squabbles, protective organization, religious commercialization among others with the aim of restoring visible or organic unity in Christendom. In either case, ecumenicity is one of the fundamentals of contemporary Christianity.

Ecumenism in Nigerian Church

In the Nigerian church, Christianity in no distant past was centrifugal, that is away from centralization – often independent and divisive. In contemporary period, however, another force is implanted, that is centripetal which draws Christians towards co-operation, merger and united action. If this centripetal force perhaps is allowed to strive, ecumenism would play a homologous role in a reconciled church naturally, with the understanding that human beings do not come to the face of the earth with an aggressive and unintelligently intransigent spirit. This does not express segregations in terms of passionate emotion, ignorance or pride. The reason Christians are divided is the conviction that they are being faithful to the will of Jesus Christ.⁸ Thus, ecumenism is not simply borne out of adversity rather hope in adversity.

The socio-religious contexts in which ecumenism sparked-off was the unholy and unhealthy rivalries among the churches at their missionary inceptions. These rivalries were strong and well pronounced in the area of proselytism, education, and politics. In fact, the acrimonious disagreement characterized both Protestants and Catholic communion.⁹ These unhealthy rivalries brought

mistrust, suspicion and hostilities as a result of the superiority complex exhibited by the Catholics and anonymous Catholics in respect of creeds, interpretation of the scriptures and doctrines. It unavoidably became glaring that in the face these skewed situations, many attempts were sought for the bodies to unite the unwholesomeness that etched their faces. The union amidst its religious attachment was brow-beaten by the side of the representatives. Okeke Hillary on his part captures the essence of this union:

The union did not materialize. The movement led to the establishment of the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) made up of various protestant churches, notably Church Missionary Society (CMS now Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion) Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Qua Iboe, and Army salvation. Today, the Christian Council of Nigeria is one of the bodies that represent (sic) non-Catholic churches in Nigeria.¹⁰

Interestingly, therefore, many different bodies later sprang up under the aegis of the Church Council of Nigeria such as Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN) and Organisation of African Instituted Church (OAIC). These groups were given extinction to wear during the Civil War that greeted Nigeria between 1967-1970. Admittedly, this body, CCN saddled with ecumenicity could not totally solve the problems. In fact, Archbishop Patterson attacked the ecumenicals thus:

We must admit that our failure is a bad one. We must accept in penitence our share of his blame. A look at sins of arrogance, insensitiveness, self-satisfaction and complacency will do for a start.¹¹

However, it has been observed that the traumatic experience in attempting ecumenism in Nigeria was not exciting.

This tangled and stifled experience spurred Christians in Nigeria to action again after the Civil war. Meanwhile, another national body emerged viz Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in 27th August, 1976. CAN emerged after a wide consultation with the Northern Christians. The association meanwhile was seen as a fellowship of churches, working together to promote the glory of God by encouraging vigorously the growth and unity of the churches, and to help procure salvation to it fullness; dismissing disparity of membership and members. CAN's objectives are among others:

To serve as the basis of response to the unity of the church and to promote mutual understanding, peace and unity among Nigerians through the propagation of the gospel, to act as clearing Houses for common statements by Christians and to act as watch-dog of the spiritual and moral welfare of Nigeria. CAN is the apex of ecumenical body in Nigeria and as such its development and activities are important for the promotion of ecumenism in Nigeria.¹²

Be that as it may, CAN still has different organization under its auspices – Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Full-Gospel Businessman International (FBMI) among others. It has been agreed unanimously that CAN has come to stay, having incorporated the various bodies within its arms.

CAN of course in the fulcrum on which the present and future ecumenical initiatives will revolve. It is therefore, in the interest of Christian leaders and indeed all Christians in Nigeria to give CAN the needed support and goodwill to achieve its objectives of enhancing the spirit of communion in the churches' togetherness, common life, mutual understanding and rapprochement and in the growing of ecumenical awareness and fellowship.¹³

Succinctly, CAN is hoped to save the association, right from its foundation, from any possible intrusion of the virus of ethnic politics or rivalry that exists between the major and minor stakeholders which, in the past, has been known and observed to have filtered into the affairs of some churches. Sincerely, we have discovered from the foregoing that ecumenism in Nigerian church is one of the signs if not the only sign of the times that will restore unity, a project for all Nigerian Christians, which must under the effusion of God's grace strive for the unity of the church. In the meantime,

We humbly acknowledge that our divisions are contrary to the will of Christ and we pray in his mercy to shorten the days of our separation and to guide us by His spirit into fullness of unity. We are thankful that during recent years we have been drawn together; prejudices have been overcome, misunderstandings removed and real, if limited, progress has been made towards our goal of a common mind.¹⁴

This ecumenism does not consist of the consciousness of our minds or the consent of our will, it is simply and honourably founded in Jesus Christ himself, who loved and died for the sake of the world and adopted it to the father by way of reconciliation and the Holy Spirit that dwells in His church. It is against this backdrop that we shall delineate the implications of ecumenism as a valuable instrument for unity.

Implications of Ecumenism in the Nigerian Church

Although, history is replete with the inveterate discord in Christian society and how attempts had been made to sow a corn from which the oak of national unity was to grow. For all through the annals of Nigerian church history, many ecumenical movements have justified their efforts in the pursuit of visible and organic unity. Ecumenism as a valuable instrument for unity

describes the progressive movement in the church towards the recovery of the unity of all believers in Christ, transcending differences in creed, ritual and polity, stressing the important thing that Christian community has in common. It is therefore heart-warming to mention the positive implications of ecumenism here.

Ecumenism as a Valuable Instrument for Peace

It is worth mentioning that it is impossible to escape from ecumenical love. Hence ecumenism will always triumph here and now. In fact, the lofty development in terms of peace is the basis in which many Christians, especially the young express their subjective experience on the platform of their Christian commitments in a 'Common Eucharist' which is the act of united and assembled church.¹⁵

In the distant past, the church Council under the Christian Council of Nigeria in collaboration with the World Council of Churches worked out modalities to restore peace and unity in the nation during the civil conflict in 1967-1970. These bodies took steps both individually and collectively, to see to the realization of Nigerian unity and to help the church. The Christian leaders appealed fervently to the military government for restraint and peace because they never wanted the nation to break up. It was thus praise-worthy that CCN in alliance with World Council of Churches helped to build and rehabilitate church building which were dilapidated alongside institutions which in no small way ushered in lasting and enduring reconciliation, reconstruction, peace and unity.¹⁶

Evidently, therefore, is the fact that an inter-denominational and ecumenical place of fellowship is being built in the Federal Capital Territory Abuja for all Christians with the view to promote unity and instill peace among Christians in the country. Undoubtedly, CAN remains insurmountable as it bridges the gap and welds Christian together. This ecumenical welfare of a united

church, inspires, galvanises the massive crusade of peace in Christendom, and the country in particular. It is in the light of the foregoing that George Whitewash spoke for ecumenicals of every generation when preaching from the court house, where he raised his eyes to the heavens and cried out:

Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians? No. Any Presbyterians? No? Any Independents or Methodists? No, no, no! Who have you there? We don't know those names here. All who are here are Christians... oh, is this the case? Then God help us to forget party, names and to become Christians indeed and truth.¹⁷

This disclosure is averred stoutly to bringing together people void of denominations, coupled with a practical steps in building a just and peaceful society, a society where sharing and caring at deeper levels of human relationship will take place.¹⁸ Besides, they are not bereft of weakness but they stand as the strong fabrics that have helped to build up and keep the country together.

Succinctly, Ecumenism as a valuable instrument for peace focuses on the act of communion which will initiate a process of growing together into one life and of advance towards complete spiritual unity. Thus, this complete spiritual unity does not digress into allowing any over-riding of conscience either by church authorities or by majorities, neither forms of worships or ritual nor a ministry, to which the people have not been used to or to which they conscientiously reject, will be imposed upon congregation.¹⁹ Spiritually, Christians can exercise solidarity by sharing the spiritual treasures of their faith with each other. When the universality of God as a father is made known by the lives and proclamation of the Christian faithful, deeper and more profound bonds of unity between people are established. When it is rooted in God, this unity offers a solidarity that transcends mere political

or national boundaries. This spiritual aspect of solidarity opens the possibility for those who are less fortunate economically to share their lives and spiritual richness with those who are materially affluent but spiritually poor.²⁰

Ecumenism as a Tool for Cross-pollination of Ideas

The united churches have come into being by acts of union whereby the separate identities of the uniting churches reconcile together all members of churches, in order to foster unity as one community. In that, all members and ministers of united churches recognize all churches as one with defined place in its life of worship, mission and service, and to establish sustained and sustaining relationships with one another across all human divides.²¹ Thus, the close-knit group is admittedly a people who are their brothers' keepers. By this it means the vital and focal participation and cohesive solidarity in such a community as sharing in life and in the means of life an effort towards onthic growth, self transcendence and enrichment.²² With this variety of separated traditions being harnessed into a synthetic whole, there would be an inclusiveness of all members and leaders of the churches with a mutual trust, which in turn, enables the development of a mutual recognition of well-grounded convictions. Such recognition permits a variety of traditions to continue enriching a united church after union.²³

Thus, cross-pollination of ideas is valued and encouraged by all and sundry, especially in leadership of the churches, and not being considered as problems or deviations. These also have helped in an inter-church 'marriage' of ideas of people who belong to different races, continents and ethnic groups. Hear thus:

Inter church marriages are a testing ground for ecumenical sincerity and commitment for the church leaders and the congregations. Serious and tireless effort is urgently demanded by the ecumenical milieu,

in which we live and work, to surmount the difficulties that arise, redirecting them towards the enrichment of faith, hope, love and unity, always looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.²⁴

Ecumenical ways of relating to churches are required among other churches in a bid to neither integrate unification and inhibit the fear of losing support nor undermine any insistence on denominational dependency, but to foster ecumenical interactions locally and nationally, and also to maintain worldwide denominational bilateral relationship. This tendency has been seen as Christian responsibilities and opportunity to serve. Corroborating this assertion, Best Thomas writes:

Unity in Christ is a kind of mutual solidarity which requires all the members to take the same kind of responsibility for one another as is implied in Paul's metaphor of the body. The United Church is the company of those who follow the lamb. Such a form or ...unity offers guidance for, and indeed judgement on, all models of unity. It is as we gird ourselves to do this task that the barriers within the church and those between the church and the world crumble.²⁵

The cross-fertilization of ideas allows the spirit of God to work for the transformation of the whole human community in each place. Indubitably, it is in recognition of this that the church appears as sacrament as well as instrument and sign of glued union with God and of the unity of the human society. This is not to entertain denominational communities or 'sheep-stealing' in order to increase membership, but total transformation of Christian community in each place and nation.²⁶ This is possible when the prejudice we face in the twenty-first century is summarily explained away the many differences and divisiveness in the community of humans. It is this love and quest for peace that can transform Nigerian Christians and being able to convince

ourselves that God is with us and this quest is the very heartbeat of God.

Ecumenism as an Article of Faith

The unity of the Christian society is a paradigm of the household of faith. Without faith there is no church. In fact, the church is the faith: a faith which is lived, professed, liturgically celebrated and preached.²⁷

This faith is inseparable from a fundamental attitude of openness to God...this faith requires the real existence of two qualities, purity and fullness, between which a tension can exist. Purity is tested by a return to normative origins; fullness demands a lucid fidelity to the authentic development undergone by the faith in the life of the church through space and time.²⁸

In regard to inter-communion extolled by the advocates of ecumenism, it has been said that unity of faith is necessary. Assuredly, it suffices for the validity of the sacrament.²⁹ Faith is not only an ecumenical promise but also an ecumenical call towards ecumenical maturity in the Christian society. Thus, much is obviously owed to Christian society to help people identify themselves more and more with Christ the founder of the church and with each other rather clinging to their original church properties and doctrinal or traditional practices. It is therefore pertinent to assert that:

Our faith in Jesus Christ must challenge us to come to the stage of losing our traditional securities, committing our lives to him, and then discovering his new models and identities. It is only when Jesus no longer doubted but committed his spirit into his father's hands that the emergence of new community,

through which God blessed many people, was enabled. Let the whole people of God participate in the total ministry of Christ.³⁰

Sequel to the above, the community of faith helps to articulate co-responsibility between local churches on mutual giving and receiving. Put differently, the costly giving and receiving extends to diverse areas in the life of the church: liturgy, pastoral relations and the practice of faith. In the community of faith, there is no place for denominational triumphalism. The ecumenical society could not and can never be mistaken for any worldly structure, hierarchy, or polity. Thus, the oneness of faith is as essential as in oneness to the truth of ecumenism. This oneness chases division, in that the scandal of the divided church is no longer the division between churches or types of traditions, but between ways of living the faith in a Christian and ecclesial manner, and this division runs through the diverse confessions.³¹

But the participation of faith is an essential aspect in the discovery of the church's unity. Indeed, faith is the sword as well as the content and act which wage war against division caused by the Satan. The church as it is, traces the origin of warfare and its vital energies to strategic event in heaven, where God has declared war on the satanic majesty and had demonstrated intermittently the mode and tools of final victory. Again, God has called the church to serve as His army in this cosmic battle raging simultaneously in heaven and earth.³² This precisely means that the ecumenical faith was never meant to be defeated by divisions, rather it is meant to embody the nature, aspirations and destinies of the community as well as transcend the division that may be envisaged. Thus, the emphasis is laid upon the transformation of life in the midst of existence in the world, and the solemn affirmation of ecumenical faith of God's activity upon the church. This vision of human unity whether an implicit or explicit article of faith burns with the explosive power for transforming society. This

article of faith on the basis of present terrestrial experience is something we both assume and strive after. This article of faith is not based on empirical proof but upon trust in God's will for the consummate unity of the creation.³³ Together in unity of faith in Christ, and with regard to our legitimate denominational diversity, this new millennium should rather spur us to accept willingly and sustain each other as members of the Body of Christ in the communion, as well as to overcome the risk of new heaven and new earth.

Despite all these positive implications Sunday Mbang, one time president of the Christian Association of Nigeria bemoans the problems ravaging Christendom today. Hear him:

(He) argued that there were a lot of things amiss within the Christian community in Nigeria and until these were corrected it could not have major impact on the leadership of the country. I am hoping that we Christians can correct ourselves.³⁴

In terms of expression, unity is gravely compromised, as the principle of personal option gains the upper hand over the principle of institution in the public behaviour of those who in the community, functionally represent Christ as a head convoking buildings and unity with their selfish ambition.³⁵

In other words, the propensity of church leaders to be domineering and unable to recognize their own limits has plagued the church throughout its history. Potential believers in Christ have found it uneasy to accept that obedience to God's behest requires equal obedience to ordained fools and ecclesiastical depots.³⁶ The general human inclinations to be fearful of large authoritarian and apparently impersonal organization coupled with compartmentalization and fragmentation of divided system has considerably led to endless suspicions that the institutional church is more interested in preserving its own existence and extending its own influence than in caring for unity. Thus, such fears are

discouraging people from believing that Christendom is attuned to the much needed unity³⁷ on the one hand and the lack of grassroots awareness which is elusive to members on the other. Therefore, ecumenism from the top cannot heal the deep wounds inflicted on the membership. So long as the emphasis is not on the grassroots, so long will church leaders regard ecumenism as premature, inopportune and unrealistic.³⁸

Furthermore, blindness to the sin of disunity, differences in scriptural interpretation, personality clashes, politicking, holier-than-thou postures, commercialization of Christianity, lust for power are all responsible for the breaches in Christendom. And these conditions of broken fellowship are contrary and counter-productive to God's will and forestall the activities of His spirit in the church.

Not only that, the denominational differences that cast so much dislike and shame on the Nigerian church can be traced back to Europe whence they originally came and where they truly belong. Nigerian Christians were and are not party to the often narrow, intemperate and sectarian squabbles that split and shattered the Christian community in Europe. The painful and striking thing is at denominational leash event after their European mentors had left them. Of course, many churches in Nigeria are still teleguided and monitored from Europe in varying degrees of subtlety and coercion.³⁹ Ecumenism in Nigerian church is again elusive in its totality. In fact, what is termed ecumenism in Nigerian church today is not ecumenism rather a body which portrays a semblance of ecumenism. To this end, church leaders express the fear of domination, fear of defection and fear of being cheated with paralysing effect on the body among others. This single-handedly informs ecumenism in Nigerian church as being in the land of the dream in so far as these fears are entertained.

Despite these catalogues of divisions in the Nigerian church, there is the need to embrace ecumenical dialogue to

settle these differences. We must of necessity do this in a spirit of open-mindedness that is far more than patronizing accommodation; which does not restrict us to deny our faith, but also does not impose any particular response; which turns criticism from outside into self-criticism and at the same time accepts everything positive; which destroys nothing of value in Christianity.⁴⁰ In essence, this means intra-confessional dialogue which is based on ecclesiocentric fashion that is, church based fashion. Hans Kung supports this argument of ecumenical dialogue when he states that:

Ecumenical dialogue is today anything but the speciality of a few starry-eyed religious peaceniks. For the first time in history, it has now taken on the character of an urgent desideratum for Christian politics. It can help to make our earth more livable, by making it more peaceful and more reconciled....Ecumenism *ad intra*, concentrated on the Christian world, and ecumenism *ad extra*, oriented toward the whole inhabited earth, are independent. Peace is indivisible; it begins with us.⁴¹

The goal of intra-faith dialogue is to admit God's love and providence that extend equally to all Christians. This is the ability of all Christians to listen to and obey the voice of God as it speaks to all Christian communities. Christians will be better able to recognise and respect the real differences that exist among them and at the same time, turn these differences into opportunities for mutual transformations of themselves and of the world. For this is the philosophy of "many become one and are increased by one."

Conclusion

Our study has revealed the implications of ecumenism in the Nigerian church. Thus, it is established that the advocate of ecumenism in Nigerian church before now used various means to harness and cement the churches together in order to foster unity in the Christian community. But ecumenism as a purifying solution has refused to unify the churches. Nevertheless, ecumenism remains a point of reference in contemporary time since disunity has never produced any solution. Thus, the implications of ecumenism do not only entail mediation but also practical and down-to-earth manifestation of unity. Ecumenism is not something static, but dynamic and pragmatic, and has the propensity of healing relationships and transforming the society. This recipe for unity must embrace all sections of Christian church propagating the name of Christ to wage war against any pig-headedness and place a point of return to oneness among believers. Such unity should embody apostolic unity, brotherliness, oneness in the whole *Oikoumene*, having the propensity to cast off disunity, discord, prejudice and barriers. Indeed, this can play a homologous role in a reconciled and unified church naturally on the fact that Christians are still one because there is one body and one spirit...one hope...one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all' (Eph 4:4-6). This one body is embedded in a shared conviction and experience that God reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has bequeathed to us the ministry of reconciliation. This *ecumene* of reconciliation in its wider sense is the hallmark of Christian amity that transcends historic disagreement and has determining value for all Christians. To confine this to diversity would rob Christian civilization of its true identity and full spiritual and cultural potential as well as distorting both historical and contemporary fact.⁴²

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