

CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE IN GHANA: A STUDY OF THE CHURCH OF PENTECOST'S DECREE ON HEAD COVERING AND 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16

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Abstract:

The seeming tension between culture and the Christian religious identity of the Ghanaian woman partly compelled the Church of Pentecost in Ghana to issue a communiqué in 2010 to annul a long-standing tradition of head covering by her women. The communiqué generated varied, but largely unfavourable reactions from the Church's members. This paper examines the culture of headgear in Ghana, the communiqué annulling the practice in the Church, the reactions of Church members, as well as 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; which appears to be a double-edged sword for both the imposition and the annulment. The paper opines that the reactions of the members of the Church indicated a lack of appreciation of the rationale of the communiqué and the actual decisions it contains. Hence, the paper proposes a careful blend of culture and Christianity in Ghana and the adoption of a more inclusive approach towards effective grassroots participation in Church governance.

Key Words: Ghanaian, Church of Pentecost, College of Apostles, Prophets and Evangelists

Introduction

A close observation of the behaviour expected of women at worship is what motivated the researchers to undertake this study. It has been observed that in some churches in Ghana, women are required to cover their heads for worship. One of such churches is the Church of Pentecost, which seems to have enforced strict head covering for her women. In prescribing head covering for her women, the Church of Pentecost is believed to be following a tradition which could be traced to 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and also found in the Ghanaian culture.

However, at the beginning of the year 2010, the College of Apostles, Prophets and Evangelists of the Church of Pentecost issued a communiqué at the end of their annual prayer meeting. The communiqué among other things banned the strict enforcement of head covering by women in the Church. This generated mixed reactions in the Church and among the general public in the country.

The aim of this research is to look at the culture of headgear among Ghanaian women; the communiqué in question and responses from the Church membership. The study also aims to examine 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, which seems to have been used to prescribe and proscribe head covering in the Church of Pentecost, to ascertain the theological basis of the communiqué. The paper proposes the way forward in dealing with the seeming tension between Christianity and culture that confronts the Christian Church in Ghana and perhaps Africa in general.

Methodology

This study was conducted between 2010 and 2012 when the Church of Pentecost's annulment of an age-long practice of head covering by her women came into the public domain. The study was to investigate the seeming tension between Christianity and culture and how the Christian Church in Ghana has dealt with the situation, using the Church of Pentecost as a case study. The primary data was mainly collected through semi-structured interviews, analyses of the communiqué, exegesis of the chosen text 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and observation by the researchers. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the following principal interviewees for the study: elders, deacons and

deaconesses (lay leaders) and ordinary members (men and women) of the Church of Pentecost in the Central Region of Ghana, and an expert in Ghanaian traditions and cultural practices. These Church informants were selected largely because many of them across the country protested and vowed to resist the directive from their leadership. The expert was chosen to get perspectives on aspects of Ghanaian cultural practices. Due to the qualitative nature and the interdisciplinary methodological approach to the study, twenty people were interviewed, though many informal interactions with other members of the Church of Pentecost and the general public also took place to cross-check some of the responses from the informants. We shall at this point briefly discuss the culture of headgear in Ghana.

Culture of Headgear in the Ghanaian Society

Traditionally, many Ghanaian societies and cultures support the use of headgears by women (Witte, 2001). In the local parlance, headgear is called “duku” which can be used by any woman on any day for any purpose, either for fashion or as a protective gear. However, it is usually worn on religious occasions and during other official ceremonies such as church services, funerals, weddings, outdooing of a new baby, durbars and festivals. During such occasions, women usually dress and put on appropriate headgears to match the occasion and their clothing (Witte, 2001), even though there is no hard-and-fast rule regarding this particular practice.

In Ghana, there are different styles of headgears practised by women, but the practice of a style is left to the discretion of the individual who puts on the headgear (Witte, 2001). According to our informant on Ghanaian traditions and cultural practices, headgears are symbolic and are sometimes used to communicate information in a non-verbal way. For example, a black headgear symbolises mourning and a white headgear symbolises a joyous occasion or moment.

In recent times, it has been observed that the Ghanaian woman usually dresses her hair according to the occasion. For church services, women dress with or without a headgear to match the rest of their clothing. For funerals, a widow may have her hair shaved as a sign of mourning and respect for the deceased (Witte, 2001). At a durbar, queen mothers, especially those in the Akan society of Ghana, may cut their hair down, trim it round neatly and dye it black, or sometimes cover it with a black hair net (Witte, 2001) or with a duku.

It is this culture of headgear which is often displayed in the Church at different times depending on the choice of the wearer and her mood. Modern Ghanaian women may still follow the traditional hairstyle of wearing headgears, yet there are new and diverse hairstyles available to them. They have the option to plait or braid their hair into different locks, perm the hair or even cut the hair. These new hairstyles may not require them to put on any headgear.

In spite of the foregoing, the Church of Pentecost in Ghana was well noted for her insistence on the use of headgears by all adult women in the Church. This insistence has often caused serious embarrassment to some young women who attended church services, either as members or visitors. In solving the dilemma that these young women and others were confronted with, and in dealing with the seeming tension between the Ghanaian culture of headgear and Christianity, the Church of Pentecost issued a communiqué in 2010 to address the situation.

The Communiqué of the Church of Pentecost

The Church of Pentecost is a classical Pentecostal Church, which was established following the missionary activities of one Pastor James McKeown in the Gold Coast in 1937. It is currently the fastest growing and the largest evangelical Church in Ghana (Larbi, 2001) and probably in West Africa. In March 2010, Church records indicated that it had a membership of about 1,503,057 with about 10,867 Local Assemblies or Congregations (The Church of Pentecost Website, 2010). The Church of Pentecost's Constitution (2005) has created Offices of Teachers, Evangelists, Prophets and Apostles for pastors who have special ministerial gifts. With the exception of Teachers, these special ministerial office holders have come together to form the College of Apostles, Prophets and Evangelists. This College meets annually to pray and give directives for the activities of the Church.

At the end of the annual prayer meeting of the College in January 2010, a communiqué was issued for the direction of the Church public. The title of the communiqué was: “Apostles Rule on Head Covering”. The main reasons for the issuance of the communiqué were contained in its preamble, which is reproduced here for the benefit of readers. It states that:

We, members of the College of Apostles, Prophets and Evangelists of The Church of Pentecost, after deep reflections in the above-stated meeting, on trends in the contemporary Church globally, and in The Church of Pentecost, in particular, have collectively agreed on the following decisions to retain the Church's growing youth and adult membership as well as open the Church's doors to people of different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to have unhindered access to the total gospel in its churches worldwide (The Church of Pentecost Website, 2010).

Three things stand out from the rationale of the communiqué, namely: retention of members of the Church; to welcome and accommodate people from diverse backgrounds; and to make the gospel accessible to all. These three components in the rationale appear to be essential for evangelisation, effective growth and sustenance of every Christian Church.

In line with the rationale, the College consequently made the following observations: Firstly, that the injunction on head covering in the Church has caused embarrassment to women over the years. Secondly, head covering is not a requirement for salvation. Thirdly, the injunction lacks biblical backing. Fourthly, the Church's fathers did not make any such imposition. Again, the individual's freedom to wear what pleases him or her should be respected provided it is modest and decent. Also, the injunction must have crept into the Church from Ghanaian cultural practices, yet culture and traditions are dynamic and change with time (The Church of Pentecost Website, 2010).

Consequently, the College gave some far-reaching directives to be observed by all members of the Church. These include the fact that female visitors who attend Church services without head covering should be accepted as they are, without being either turned back or offered a head covering, since head covering does not enhance a person's salvation. Secondly, females in the Church who may or may not want to cover their head during church services should not be seen as sinners or being less spiritual. Furthermore, women should rather fashion their hairstyles in a decent, modest and appropriate manner to the glory of God. However, the wearing of seductive or sexually-provocative dress should be discouraged in the Church. Hence, women must avoid the practice of cleavage (the partial exposure of breasts) as that does not glorify the Lord (The Church of Pentecost Website, 2010). These recommendations attracted varied reactions or responses from the Church members across the country.

Responses from Members of the Church of Pentecost to the Communiqué

Responses obtained from members of the Church of Pentecost were largely collected through semi-structured interviews and informal interactions. Some of our informants suggested that the communiqué was uncalled-for since the leaders themselves had admitted that the text 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 was unclear. They added that headgear is part of the Ghanaian culture and had become part of the dress code of women in the Church. Therefore, they insisted that it was unnecessary on the part of the leaders to use an "unclear text to cause confusion" in the Church.

Again, those informants who seemed to disagree with the directives contended that the General Secretary of the Church of Pentecost in Ghana has already identified some challenges facing the Church in Ghana in the twenty-first century. These include the over-crowded nature of activities in most denominations, the threat of Islam and modernity. To them, head covering was not part of the challenges identified.

Our respondents explained that there seemed to be a gradual loss of focus on the Church's core constituency largely found in the lower class of the society. One referred to Wagner (1996) who indicates that the attention of some Pentecostal Churches appeared to be concentrated on the middle and upper class people, to the neglect of the poor who have largely sustained them. To the informants, the annulment of head covering tended to appeal to the middle and upper class women than those in the lower class who were in the majority.

Also, some respondents indicated that Islamic women generally cover their head at all times, even outside the mosque, yet Islam seems to be growing in membership in Ghana. In the last two censuses in 2000 and 2010, Muslim population in Ghana was put at 15.9% and 17.6% respectively (Ghana Statistical Service, 2002; 2012). Our informants maintained further that there are certain distinctive Pentecostal characteristics, which have become traditions distinguishing them from non-Pentecostals. Head covering is identified as one of such distinctive characteristics, which also finds expression in the Ghanaian culture and ought to be maintained.

Moreover, our respondents added that what really infringed on the rights of women in the Church of Pentecost was not the strict adherence to head covering, but rather the lack of progression in terms of leadership roles. It is imperative to state that the highest position a woman in the Church could attain is to become a lay leader with the title of “Deaconess”. On the contrary, men who are appointed to the lay position of “Deacons” could progress to become “Elders”. When it comes to the office of the clergy, women are not ordained in the Church.

However, other informants argued that initially, it was difficult to invite their lady friends to accompany them to Church due to the imposition of head covering. Hitherto, those women who went to Church with their heads uncovered were either given headgears or something on the Church premises to cover their heads or were sent home to get one, causing serious embarrassment in the process. The respondents were, therefore, very happy that the communiqué had come at the appropriate time to address that difficulty.

Apart from these responses through interviews, it was widely reported in sections of the Ghanaian media that members of the Church, mostly lay leaders, had reacted variedly and sometimes angrily at hurriedly organised meetings following the issuance of the communiqué. For example, at the Area meeting in Takoradi in the Western Region of Ghana, some lay leaders of the Church were reported to have hurled insults on the Area Apostle and threatened to beat him up. Some also vowed to pray for God to kill the architects of the communiqué, who were described as trying to destroy the Church (Daily Guide Newspaper, February 19, 2010).

These responses from members of the Church of Pentecost in the interviews, interactions and in the media reports indicate that generally, the decision of their leaders was not well accepted. However, it is obvious from the reactions above that the members did not consider the theological position of the communiqué and the intentions of the College. Perhaps, examination of the chosen text 1 Corinthians 11: 2-16 might throw light on the discussions on head covering.

Examination of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

This study does not seek to do an exhaustive examination of the entire passage, only relevant portions are used. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 has been studied by various scholars including A. C. Thiselton (2000), J. D. Dunn (1995), R. F. Collins (1999), G. D. Fee (1987), E. S. Fiorenza (1987) and others and it has generated lots of debate in scholarship. Some scholars such as G. W. Trompf (1980) and G. O. Walker (1987) suggest that the passage might have been inserted by a later editor. However, others like J. Murphy-O'Connor (1980) and Dunn (1999) accept the passage as being authentically Pauline. They suggest that Paul has previously dealt with external issues like meat offered to idols and in this passage he is dealing with internal issues when the community is gathered for worship. One of such issues is the hairstyle of women at worship.

The issue of whether Paul is talking about extra cover or hair

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul uses different descriptions for hairstyle. In the first place, he gives injunction that men at worship should not *kata kephalēs échōn* (“having down the head”, v. 4). This is generally interpreted that men should not put on cover or they should not have long hair at worship. Paul also says that it is shameful for women to worship *akatakalúptō tē kephalē* (v.5). The meaning of this phrase is highly debated and will be looked at later.

Paul again suggests that it is shameful for a woman to be shaved. He then analogically compares such shame to that of the uncovered head of the woman and suggests that a woman should be covered (vv. 5b-6). In verse 7, he says that a man should not cover his head and in verse 10, he speaks of a woman having *exousía* (authority) on her head. Then in verses 13-15, he talks about the fact that it is not good for a woman to pray to God uncovered because naturally long hair is her glory and it is given to her instead of a *peribólaion*, (wrapper). It is difficult to determine from these descriptions whether Paul is talking about hair or an extra cover. Scholars are divided over this issue and their interpretations depend on the meaning given to the various phrases and words as well as the particular social and cultural perspectives believed to be behind the text.

The key word *akatakalúptos* occurs only in this passage, 1 Corinthians 11:5, in the New Testament. However, the same word is used twice in the Greek version of the Old Testament (LXX). In Leviticus 13:45 the Hebrew word *parah*, is translated *akatakalúptos* in the LXX and it is rendered

“to uncover” by the New American Standard Version (NAS), “to be in disorder” by the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), “to be dishevelled” by the New Revised Standard (NRS) in the context of man found to be a leper. The same Hebrew word is used in Numbers 5:18 in the case of a woman convicted of prostitution and there the word has been rendered in Greek as *apokalúpto* “to uncover” by the King James Version (KJV), “loosened” by NAS, “unbind” by NJB and “dishevelled” by NRS. It is possible that the word connotes both the idea of removing an external cover from the hair and the idea of loosening one’s hair or leaving it unkempt.

Writers like Fee (1987), Keener (1998), F. F. Bruce (1978) and Thiselton (2000) suggest that in this passage Paul is talking about extra cover or veil for the woman at worship. Keener (1998) adds that an uncovered woman was taken to be a prostitute or a young woman looking for a husband. He suggests that the hair is the most important aspect of female beauty reserved for a husband. Thiselton (2000) makes reference to Aline Rouselle as indicating that all respectable women in Roman Corinth used a veil, and it was not safe for a woman to go out unveiled. The veil was thus meant to protect Christian women at worship.

Others like Fiorenza (1987), Murphy O’Connor (1980) and B. Witherington (1995) suggest that Paul is talking about either unkempt or loose hair because among other things the word veil did not occur in the text. In the view of Fiorenza (1987) dishevelled hair could evoke a picture of ritual ecstasy prevalent at several Greek cults. Women of the cult of Isis in Corinth, for example, were known to practice with unbound hair and the fear was that outsiders might think the new Christian Church was just another ecstatic cult. According to Witherington (1995), by “covering” Paul is not talking about a veil but throwing part of one’s cloth to cover the head, as indicated by the word *peribólaion*, or wrapper. For Murphy-O’Connor (1980), Paul grew up in an environment where men were used to turbans and therefore head cover could not disturb him. Moreover, the word *káluma* (veil) is not mentioned in the text but the word *koma* (hair) is mentioned in verse 14.

The arguments above demonstrate that there is no consensus on the meaning of the word *akatakalúptos*. The word has been traditionally translated as a cover for the woman, but with time new interpretations have been used to render the word as loose, loosened, unbound or unkempt hair.

Paul also says that the woman ought to have *exousía* (authority) on her head. The sort of authority Paul is referring to here is not clear; whether it is a passive authority exercised over the woman or an active authority exercised by the woman herself over her own head. In this particular context, the Greek word *exousía* is added to *epí tēs kephalēs* which has led many ancient translators, as well as some Church Fathers, to translate it as “authority over” or “authority on” (passive authority). Consequently, the word is interpreted metaphorically to mean a “veil” (Collins, 1999), which is a sign that the woman is under her husband’s authority and gives her the right to lead the congregation in prayer (Fee, 1987).

Bruce (1978) and Collins (1999) consider “authority” here to be the woman’s own authority over her head. L. Mercadante (1978) also suggests that the meaning of the word changes with culture. While previously it meant “authority over the woman”, now it means the woman’s own authority, since she is a full individual in her own rights. A. Padgett (1984) argues along the same line and gives various examples from the New Testament where the word “authority” is used in a similar way. He adds,

... it can be concluded that the phrase in v.10 means: women ought to have the freedom, the right or power to do what they wish with their heads. In the context of this passage, it would mean that women ought to have the right to choose whatever hairstyle they wish (Padgett, 1984, pp. 69-86).

In this context, we tend to agree with the views that the authority is the woman’s, because in Ghana, it is the women who decide what hairstyle or headgear they should use for a particular occasion; hence the exercise of that authority lies within their purview. Given the dynamic nature of culture and interpretation, we are inclined to accept these new interpretations of the terms *akatakalúptos* and *exousía* in the context of this paper as elucidated above.

The Way Forward

Deductions from the analyses above tend to agree with the idea of the communiqué that the text and Paul’s intentions were unclear. Hence, the text could be used to either enforce head covering by women or allow women to uncover their head during Church worship. Secondly, cultural

perspectives of readers could affect the interpretation of the text, which is also affirmed by the communiqué. Therefore, given the dynamic nature of culture in general, and the Ghanaian culture in particular, head covering as a cultural practice should not be imposed on Ghanaian Christian women as a requirement for Church activities.

Currently in Ghana, the issue of head covering seems to be more socially conditioned than cultural. It appears to be prevalent in rural settings than in urban settings, as well as among the lower class than the middle and upper class in society. Hence, one social situation should not be imposed on the general Church community. Again, the Ghanaian society is increasingly becoming urbanised. Therefore, the Christian Church in general, and the Church of Pentecost in particular, cannot continue to focus solely on a particular segment of the society to the detriment of others. Thus the accusation of a loss of concentration on its core membership group by the respondents should be reconsidered in the light of social change and the need for inclusion.

As already indicated, it is apparent that the intention of the leaders of the Church of Pentecost was in the interest of the growth of the Church. Secondly, the Church cannot continue to cause embarrassment to women in the name of religion. Also, our culture does not impose any particular dress code on women and this must be extended to women in the Church.

However, we acknowledge that the seemingly negative reactions from the Church members were inevitable because change is a difficult process that needs to be carried out gradually with education from the grassroots. Probably, this is where the leaders of the Church of Pentecost failed because from the interviews and the media reports, it is obvious the entire membership, including the lay leaders were not informed about the intended change. The first encounter of this drastic change in church policy was in the media, which is not acceptable in church administration. Therefore, we propose that any change in church policy of any kind must go through extensive consultations and sensitization to gain acceptance among the rank and file.

Conclusion

Christianity and culture can co-exist to promote mutual cooperation and the development of a people. From all indications, most members of the Church of Pentecost in Ghana appear to look at head covering as a tradition of the Church that identifies their women from other Christian women in Ghana. However, the basis for the imposition of head covering by women either in the Ghanaian culture or in the Christian Church is no longer tenable. This is because culture is dynamic and changes with time; while a careful study of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 shows that the injunction of head covering of women in the Church is not categorical. The tone of the communiqué shows that the intentions were good and must be accepted by the members in the spirit of inclusion, since the gospel must be made available to all without any inhibitions.

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