

# Examining the Authority of Church Leaders in African Christianity



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## ABSTRACT

It has been said that the missionaries came to Africa with the mindset that Africans were without culture or at best, they had an evil culture that must be completely eradicated. They rejected anything African so as to introduce the Western culture which they considered enlightened. However, whatever teaching that the then missionaries and church leaders later introduced, would have to be processed through African cultural lenses. By that, the people applied their own cultural concepts to the teachings they received. This paper examines how cultural concepts of the authority of leadership help the African Christian to situate and interpret the teachings and practices of the universal church from their own perspectives. Authority is defined and examined from the perspectives of legitimacy and functionality. The question of who has the final authority in the church is also discussed to strengthen the corporate leadership practised and offer some solutions to challenges of in-fighting within the leadership of congregations.

**Keywords:** authority, legitimacy, functionality, consent

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## INTRODUCTION

Christianity was introduced to Sub-Saharan Africa from Europe and later America. As the missionaries brought the Gospel to Africa, they also introduced teachings and practices from their own cultural background and heritage. Many practices they introduced and their interpretation of Scripture, remain largely with the churches they founded till this day. For example, the pastoral gowns prescribed by the missionaries are still in use by the churches they founded. However, the African soil was not *tabula rasa* (blank slate) as might have been thought; neither did the Africans receive the message passively. African culture has much to do with the Christian message and practices since their introduction to the African soil. This means that believers would have to interpret the message and assimilate the faith using their own cultural concept which involves their worldview, language, thought patterns, symbols, practices and artifacts among others. Although some of these may be subtle and seem insignificant, they provide the basis on which Africans accept and own the teachings and practices of the church. Translation of the Bible into the various local languages proves to be very helpful in this regard. This is because in those translations, they could hear God speak directly to them in their own languages just as it happened on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts Chapter 2. Knighton rightly observes that:

Now Africans are not seen to have passively received a pre-formulated gospel rhetoric for replication, but to have worked on it in many subtle ways and found ways, translating the message, appropriating Christian traditions, resisting the formation of social institutions and buildings so that they are totally alien as the mind of the missionary might have them, but local enough to be owned, valued and maintained. On the underside of history, they may not appear authentically African either to the traditionalist there nor to the Western observer, but where power in lacking to overturn the Western ecclesiastical insertion, small adjustments to the incoming tradition were significant ones.<sup>1</sup>

Asante expresses a similar view when he opines that there was the need for Africanisation of Christian thought and

<sup>1</sup> Ben Knighton, "Christian Enculturation in the Two-Thirds World," in *Global Christianity*, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401204323\\_005](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401204323_005) Accessed 27th May, 2020.

practice by using African thought forms and philosophy to articulate and interpret the Christian faith in Africa.<sup>2</sup> The African culture got actively involved in interpreting and applying the Christian message from African perspective. Kpobi also asserts that the churches in Ghana have never pretended that they were operating in a vacuum but have boldly confronted issues of culture and local tradition.<sup>3</sup> In other words, issues of tradition and culture have been prominent with the African church since its inception. How African cultures influence the concept of authority of leadership in the Christian church is the subject of this paper.

The Greek word, *exousia*, translated *authority*, has its root meaning as “it is lawful,” i.e. what is allowed by law.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, authority has to do with legitimacy or the right to do what is allowed by law. Engstrom has this to say, “A common but well-reasoned definition of authority is this: ‘Authority is whatever you possess at the moment that causes someone else to do what you want him to do at the moment.’”<sup>5</sup> It could be seen from Engstrom’s definition that authority goes beyond legitimacy or right. Of interest to this discussion is also the definition by *All Nations English Dictionary* which defines authority as “a person or group holding the ability, power or right, to control and command.” It gives the second meaning as “power to influence, (especially) resulting from experience, knowledge, etc.”<sup>6</sup> The two dictionary definitions are pointing to two aspects of authority, that is gaining the authority and exercising same. Authority stands on two legs; legitimacy and functionality. On one hand, to have authority, one should be able to lay legitimate claim to it. On the other hand, one must be able to exercise the authority gained. This is to say, for authority to be functional, those in positions of authority must exercise it. In other words, the functionality of authority is not automatic as people may be put in positions of authority but become unable to function. It is not uncommon for people in positions of authority to be undermined both in society and in the church.

Authority is elastic by nature and thus expands and shrinks; strengthens and weakens, depending on the level of influence that leaders have within the group. The level of influence of a person or group is a determinant of the level of exercise of authority. People who are highly influential carry with them high levels of authority. Others will defer opinions to such people. However, views of people without influence may pass unnoticed because they do not carry enough authority. This discussion therefore explores how African concepts and thought patterns contribute to gaining and exercising of authority in the church. The paper focuses on some practices of the church, some doctrines and biblical texts on which they are based and some African concepts that help the believers to find meaning to them. In discussing issues of authority in Africa, the chief comes to the fore because of their prominence in African societies. The position of the chief is thus the main reference although mention is made of other leaders as well. Despite this, the church in Africa will base its teachings and practices on scripture and church tradition rather than African culture and tradition.

### Legitimacy

Gaining authority legitimately is recognised in every society where there are leaders. The laws, regulations and customs will spell out the acceptable ways that one could become a leader. Although there are differences from one church to another and also from one traditional area to another, one can identify some aspects of legitimacy that are common to African society and the church. These are discussed subsequently.

### Selection for Position of Authority

Legitimacy starts with the selection process whether it is in the church or society. The basic qualification for becoming a leader in the church is that the candidate must be a member. Membership of the denomination for several years is highly considered. If it becomes necessary to appoint leaders from another church, then it becomes necessary that the person is coming from a church with similar teachings as the church giving the appointment. To prove membership, the candidate must be nominated or approved by his pastor and the local leadership. Many reasons may be assigned for this practice but for this discussion, the leader must be groomed in the church to become conversant with its teachings, practices and workings. Moreover, it enables people to testify about the person’s character and capabilities in accordance with the church’s own moral standards and aspirations.

In African culture, the chief is selected from the royal family.<sup>7</sup> That is the family that is known and accepted by the people for providing the chief.<sup>8</sup> Anyone, who becomes a chief without tracing his lineage as a member of the royal

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Asante, “Interpreting and Articulating the Faith: Lessons from Early Christian History for Africa Today,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 17, no. 1, (2014): 21.

<sup>3</sup> David N.A. Kpobi, *Mission in Ghana: An Ecumenical Heritage* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 2008), 150.

<sup>4</sup> William Eddy Vines, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1952)

<sup>5</sup> Ted W. Engstrom, *The Making of a Christian Leader* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 112.

<sup>6</sup> *All Nations English Dictionary* (All Nations Literature, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions: Perspectives on Akan Leadership Formation on Christian Leadership Development* (Accra: SonLife, 2012), 34 – 35; P.A. Twumasi, *Medical Systems in Ghana: A Study in Medical Sociology* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1975), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 109.

family will lack legitimacy. Such a person will be considered a usurper and not accorded the respect that goes with the position. Members of the royal family are groomed from childhood to enable them take up the position when the need arises. Being a member of the royal family also indicates that the person is a member of the community whether he is resident at home or not. In the current era, when people would have to travel away from home for economic and other reasons, the choice is extended to people who are not domiciled at home provided such people visit home frequently and contribute to development. However, in the church there are no royal families as all believers form the royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5 & 9). So membership of the church or denomination satisfies the need.

In addition, the leader must be appointed by the appropriate persons or body responsible for doing so. In the church, the appointment may be seen in ordination and placement. In many denominational churches in Africa, ordination is done by regional and national officials. These will recruit, train and ordain their ministers. Moreover, most churches in Africa prefer that pastors are placed by executive order. Instead of the local assembly engaging in a search for a pastor, the national or regional officials will make transfers and postings throughout the organisation under their jurisdiction. These practices are based on missionary traditions where missionary organisations ordained and placed their staff. Biblically, it is also found in the practices of Paul and his associates who appointed leaders for churches in every town (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).

The issue of receiving an appointment from an appropriate body reflects in African culture as well. In African societies, the chief must be appointed by king makers. These are people who are clothed with the responsibility of selecting and enthroning the chief. One cannot become a chief without the king makers' approval just as one cannot become a pastor without ordination and placement from the appropriate body.

Africans believe in receiving a call from God before taking up leadership in the church, especially the pastoral office. The calling is at times accompanied by spiritual encounters like prophesies, dreams and visions. In this case, the individual may have to demonstrate that he has received a calling from God to be in ministry to qualify for selection. This must reflect in the person's ministry as a lay person for others to recognize. Despite cutting across all churches, this is more pronounced in African Initiated Churches (AIC) and Charismatic Churches whose founders are also leaders. They lack the capacity to prove their legitimacy by appointment and placement by a higher authority. They would have to readily narrate their encounters with God to prove their calling. They also have to exhibit charisma as proof that God has called and empowered them to establish and lead churches. The calling of men by God in Scripture like Paul, Peter and the other Apostles provides biblical support in such cases (Acts 9:3-19; Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:4-11). Paul's conversion, for example, was dramatic and he could readily narrate it to prove his case when necessary (Acts 9:3-19; 22:6-21; 26:12-20). The call of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), Moses (Exodus 3:1-10 and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-10) and other prophets in the Old Testament, are some other points of reference.

The concept of calling to ministry and leadership is popular in Africa as it has been associated with traditional priesthood. In Africa, the candidate may be called by a deity through spirit possession. The spirit of the deity may possess the person and make him/her behave strangely. Experienced priests or diviners will be consulted to ascertain the cause of the abnormal behaviour. If it is established that the person is called to serve a divinity, such a person undergoes training with experienced priests.

### Ordination and Spiritual Authority

Many Africans believe that ordination comes with sacred authority commonly referred to as spiritual power. It is generally believed that church leaders have the spiritual authority to enable them function effectively in their roles. African tradition will recognise the source of a chief's authority as coming from the ancestors whose stool he/she sits on. Traditional priests also trace their authority to the deity they serve. However, African Christians will move the source of sacred authority from the realm of ancestors and deities to that of God through Jesus Christ. This is because African Christians do not give place to ancestors and deities in their worship. They believe authority belongs to God and that he empowers people through Jesus Christ. John Mbiti and Kwame Bediako emphasise this point when they affirm that Africans see Jesus above all else as *Christus Victor*, that is, Christ is supreme over every spiritual rule and authority.<sup>9</sup> As Bediako explains, Africans understand that Jesus is victorious over evil forces and powers at work in the world and by that answers to the need for a powerful protector.<sup>10</sup> To the African then, ordination brings the leader close to this powerful source of authority.

Through ordination the church confirms the call of God on people and also empowers them by laying on of hands.<sup>11</sup> As Johnson explains, through ordination the church says to the ordinand, "The Holy Spirit is calling you to

<sup>9</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1998), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture, A Ghanaian Perspective*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Darell W. Johnson, "Ordination" in *Leadership Handbook of Management and Administration*, edited by James D. Berkley (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994) 18 – 19.

this particular work, and we claim Christ's power for you."<sup>12</sup> This position is confirmed by the ordination rites of some churches. Excerpts from the ordination rite of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, for example, confers power on the ordinand when it declares, "The Lord endue you with power from on high and make you a blessing unto many."<sup>13</sup> This resonates well in the African setting where chiefs and priests are always installed with sacred power.<sup>14</sup> Many, therefore, see ordination as empowering people called into ministry to enable them function well. However, motivation for seeking anointing and empowerment comes from the ministry of Jesus. He declares in Luke 4:18 that the Spirit of God was upon him and he was anointed for ministry in its various forms. Other scriptures include the anointing of Aaron and his sons as priests (Exodus 40:13-15) and the anointing of Saul (1 Samuel 10:1) and David as kings of Israel (1 Samuel 16:13; 2 Samuel 2:4). In addition, Jesus assures the believers of spiritual power for ministry as in Luke 10:17-20 and Acts 1:8. African Christians do not have any reason to doubt transmission of spiritual power when it is promised by Jesus and practised in Scripture.

In many charismatic churches, spiritual authority is seen more in what is referred to as the anointing.<sup>15</sup> As Asamoah-Gyadu puts it, the anointing is understood in charismatic circles as "the power of God in action."<sup>16</sup> This power of God is expected to manifest strongly in the ministry of the individual. It is believed that, if God calls a person into ministry, His power must be seen at work in that individual. The power may manifest in preaching powerful and captivating messages, giving prophetic messages, performing acts of healing, deliverance and miracles and in exhibiting such other power and vocal gifts. Again, the ministry of Jesus, Paul, Peter and other Apostles as well as David the King quoted above provide motivations for such interpretations. Likewise that of the Old Testament prophets like Moses, Elijah and Elisha.

The official Protestant position does not subscribe to the transmission of power at ordination. For the Protestants, the rite of ordination is simply to set aside the individual for the proclamation of the word (preaching and teaching) and administration of Sacraments. Elizabeth Barnes explains that, for Protestants, ordination is not regarded as conferring new rights or powers or as infusing the Holy Spirit for the work of ministry.<sup>17</sup> However, these are exactly the popular belief among Africans that at ordination people receive spiritual power and impartation of the Holy Spirit. These, it is believed, bring leaders under the protection of God and also make them functional in ministry. This power is seen as transmitted by persons who themselves have it and in the position to impart others.

Although leaders of Protestant churches may hold to an official position that no power is transmitted, they are also aware that their members believe otherwise. This view is popular because in the traditional setting, candidates for chieftaincy will have to undergo rituals of installation after their nomination.<sup>18</sup> Chieftaincy is a sacred institution in Africa and the rituals are meant to bring the chief into a close relationship with the ancestors and also transform them into sacred personalities.<sup>19</sup> Chiefs occupy stools of the ancestors and the transformation empowers them to gain sacred authority. They then become intermediaries between the ancestors and the people, performing rituals and offering prayers on behalf of the people. The concept, as Kwame Bediako puts it, is that "the well-being of the society depends upon the maintenance of good relations with the ancestors on whom the living depend for help and protection."<sup>20</sup> The rituals of installation transform an ordinary person into a sacred one. Due to their transformed state, the chiefs have to observe some taboos. They are forbidden to walk barefoot, eat in public or get drunk, for example. In line with this, the members of the church expect their leaders to carry themselves in similar ways. They do not expect their leaders to walk barefoot, eat in public or get drunk.

The African belief is close to the position of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches which teach that charisma and spiritual power are transmitted through the laying on of hands at ordination. For them, the hands of the bishop officiating ordination transmit power. As Peter Toon, a renowned Anglican scholar, puts it, "ordination is seen both as giving authority to act as minister of Christ and of giving the power/gift of the Holy Spirit for particular tasks of ministry."<sup>21</sup> To these Episcopal churches, spiritual power is imparted during ordination.

The sacred nature of chiefs is appropriated in the title *Nana* (Akan) or *Togbi / Togbe* (Ewe) conferred on them.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, "Ordination," 19.

<sup>13</sup> Presbyterian Church of Ghana, *Liturgy and Service Book Part Two* (Accra: Waterville Publishing House, 1987), 54.

<sup>14</sup> Christian F.W. Gbekor, "The Impact of African Religion and Culture on Christian Leadership in Ghana" *The Bible, Cultural Identity, and Missions* edited by Daniel Berchie, Daniel K. Bediako and Dziedzorm R. Asafo. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016) 109.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Accra: African Christian Press, 2005), 154.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Sighs and Signs of the Spirit: Ghanaian Perspectives on Pentecostalism and Renewal in Africa* (Akropong Akwapim: Regnum Africa, 2015), 70 – 71.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Barnes, "Ordination" in *New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology* edited by Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 356.

<sup>18</sup> Gbekor, "The Impact of African Religion and Culture on Christian Leadership in Ghana," 102.

<sup>19</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Kwame Bediako, "Some Christian Foundations for an African Democracy." *Church Leaders' Challenge Book 2* (Accra: Challenge Enterprises of Ghana, 2003), 124.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Toon, "Episcopalianism" in *Who Runs the Church: 4 Views on Church Government* edited by Paul E. Engle and Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 26.



Once installed, the chief bears the title *Nana*, whether young or old. When used as a title for chiefs, *Nana* or *Togbi* means more than an old person. It denotes that the individual has been transformed into a sacred personality and in association with the ancestors. This is in line with the use of the title for ancestors in which it refers to them as sacred institutions. To mention the name of a chief without the title is a show of disrespect. Added to the title are stool names taken by chiefs. The stool names are names of chiefs who reigned in the past and have become ancestors themselves. The use of the title and stool name is a demonstration of the belief that the chief reigns with the authority of the ancestors who themselves are sacred.

The concept of title for leaders is prominent in African Christianity as well. At consecration or ordination, the church confers titles like Reverend, Reverend Father, Pastor, Elder, Deacon, Bishop, Prophet, Apostle, and so on in line with church tradition. An African will not mention the name of an ordained minister without some title. Beyond these, the common title for pastors in Ghana is *Osofo*. This was an Akan term for traditional priests and officials who interpreted the divine message of the deity.<sup>22</sup> They also performed the rituals to take care of the needs of society, the worshippers and clients. These priests and officials did not get possessed, making its use acceptable to the church. When applied to the church, *Osofo* refers to the priest or official of the Supreme God. What is interesting is that, in translating the Bible into vernacular, the missionaries settled on African names for God like *Onyame* (Akan) and *Mawu* (Ewe). This is because African people give place to the Supreme God whom they recognise as above all and equal to none. Although Africans offer prayers to this God, they would not normally have a shrine or cult dedicated to its worship. For that reason, there is no common title for the officials of the Supreme God and *Osofo* comes in readily to fill the gap. As the term applies to the church it also comes with the traditional concept of a priest as one who interprets the message of the gods and performs rituals. In other words, many consult with the pastor with the mind that he will receive and deliver to them a message from God and also perform the rituals to take care of their needs whether it is health, financial, social, or whatever issue.

### Induction Ceremony

Pastors are ordained at public ceremonies but anytime they are posted or transferred to new stations, many denominations will have to organise induction ceremonies to install them. This is usually a public ceremony at which the incoming pastor is officially presented to the people he is assigned to serve. The pastor is made to repeat his ordination vows in which he pledges to serve God and the church diligently. Then there is the right hand of fellowship in which the officiating ministers and representatives of the congregations they are to take charge of, assure the newly inducted pastor of their approval and support. The induction ceremony has some outward resemblance to the out-dooring of traditional leaders.

After the selection and rituals of installation, chiefs are presented to the people at a public out-dooring and installation ceremony. At the ceremony, the new chief would be introduced to the people as their leader. An important element in this is the swearing of oath. Oponi-Frimpong observes that among the Akan, the new leader first swears to the king makers his willingness to serve the community and his readiness to lead them. The king makers in turn swear to the new leader, assuring him of their full support, if he provides good leadership.<sup>23</sup> The king makers do these things in their capacity as people's representatives fully aware that the people will not support the wrong candidate. The community will in turn show their approval and support of the new leader. With the induction, the leader has taken a position that comes with authority which they are expected to exercise.

### Functionality of Authority

Legitimacy sows the seed of functionality of authority. If the candidate is a popular choice of the people it makes acceptability easy. This situation boosts their influence and facilitates their capacity to function, exercising the authority they have. Any dent on legitimacy is likely to have a negative effect on the leader's authority. Legitimacy therefore, creates an opportunity for bonding between the leader and the people which is necessary for functional authority. Functionality is also influenced by what the leader brings to the position and how others respond to it. A positive response from the people is an indication of their consent which is necessary for influence.

### Consent of the People

The consent starts earlier with the ordination, placement and induction and continues to impact the exercise of authority. When the people do not accept a leader, that leader's capacity to function may be impaired. To impose an unpopular person on the people, would cripple the leader's authority to start with. The issue of consent of the people is also important in gaining authority by African church leaders. The consent that members give to leaders determines the recognition

<sup>22</sup> Brigid Sackey, 'Recognising Other Dimensions of Epistemology: Conceptualisation of Abosom ("Deities") in Ghanaian Experience' *Research Review of the Institute of African Studies* 16 no.1 (2000): 25.

<sup>23</sup> Oponi-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions*, 35

and influence the leaders command. People join the church because of common goals like worship and serving God and also to benefit from the blessings available.<sup>24</sup> When members see that leaders are not acting to promote the common goals, they are likely to withhold their support. On the otherhand, if leadership is working for the benefit of the members, the level of consent swells up. Even where the clergy are placed by executive order, these pastors will still have to go through some form of validation by the members.<sup>25</sup> The members have their own ways of authenticating these forms of appointment by assessing the person's ministry. They would like to assure themselves that the pastor has the ability to meet their aspirations. If they are convinced of the pastor's ability in this regard, they show their approval of the pastor. However, if they are not convinced, they may withhold their consent although the pastor is placed legitimately by the church hierarchy. This explains why at times some congregations reject pastors assigned them by the church hierarchy. Church leaders will, therefore, have to work strategically to gain the consent of the membership instead of relying solely on their appointment and placement order.

The concept of gaining the consent of the people is common in the African cultural system. Asante is of the view that chiefs as political leaders exercise their authority with the consent of the people.<sup>26</sup> Dzobo also asserts that among the Ewes of Ghana and Togo, political power originates from the people.<sup>27</sup> According to Dzobo, this is evidenced in the proverbs, "The state does not reside in a chief but it is the chief that resides in a state" and "You do not become a chief by sitting on a big stool" (*Ziga menyɛ fia o*).<sup>28</sup> Another important Ewe proverb pointing to this says, "It is the people who carry the chief" (*Ameɛ koa fia*). These are to say that functionally the chief derives his authority from the people. Kwame Gyekye emphasizes the same position by saying, "the consent of the people is required in the exercise of the chief's authority."<sup>29</sup> He supports this view with sayings from some other African peoples as follows:

According to the Basotho: A chief is a chief by the people. The Lovedu of the Transvaal say: chieftainship is people. And the Ndebele of Zimbabwe say: The King is the people. To respect the king is to respect one self. He who despises our king despises us. He who praises our king praises us.<sup>30</sup>

In the African cultural setting then, it is important for the chief to earn the consent of the people to rule effectively. This is because, functionally, authority of the chief is derived through the trust that the people repose in him.<sup>31</sup>

Africans cherish some cultural values and chiefs and other traditional leaders who are considered role models are expected to live according to those values. The chiefs are seen as an embodiment of what is proper and acceptable in the society.<sup>32</sup> To win the consent of the people, he has to demonstrate such values. Considered here are the values of working with the council of elders, consensus building, appropriate personal conduct and competent leadership which are also demonstrated in African Christianity.

### Working with Council of Elders

The dominant form of leadership in Africa is corporate leadership which is exhibited in working with the council of elders. The council may be referred to as the church board or church council. Like the traditional system, the church board represents the people and works with the pastor to ensure the smooth running of the church. It is the bonding together and effectiveness that builds the consent of the group for their leader. That consent is necessary for leaders to have influence over the church and also strengthen their authority. The work of ministry involves working with people and the leader will have to work at building mutually beneficial relationships. The doctrine of the Trinity in which God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are seen to be working together in a mutual relationship, provides motivation for cooperation. Biblical passages that indicate Apostle Paul and his associates appointing leaders for churches also provide points of reference (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

Africans feel at home with this practice because it takes a cue from the cultural setting. Chiefs have elders whom they sit in council with to discuss issues and make important decisions concerning the state or community. These are usually representatives of various lineages constituting the community. Whenever, the chief makes a pronouncement on important state affairs, the decision is expected to have the support of the council of elders. The elders will normally have their ears on the ground so as to advise the chief appropriately about the sentiments of the populace and issues affecting the state or community. The chief as a father figure also deals directly with the people as they are free to consult him on all matters affecting them. The chief is, therefore, in contact with his people directly and also through the elders. As

<sup>24</sup> Robert C. Worley, *A Gathering of Strangers: Understanding the Life of Your Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 33.

<sup>25</sup> James D. Anderson and Ezra Earl Jones, *The Management of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978), 49.

<sup>26</sup> Emmanuel Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development: Ethical and Political Reflections on the Ghanaian Experience* (Accra: Challenge Enterprise, 2007), 56 – 57.

<sup>27</sup> Noah K Dzobo, *The Chief and His Elders Among the Ewe of Ghana and Togo* (Kumasi: High Calling Publishers, 2001), 47.

<sup>28</sup> Dzobo, *The Chief and His Elders*, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 110.

<sup>30</sup> Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 109.

<sup>31</sup> Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 109.

<sup>32</sup> Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions*, 191.

Twumasi puts it, this political structure provides a stable government with the consent of the governed.<sup>33</sup>

### Consensus Building

Related to working with counsel of elders is decision-making by consensus. Consensus building is also a feature of church leaders in Africa. At church board meetings, it is rare for leaders to call for motion and vote on issues. It is done only if it is a requirement for the issue at stake or if it cannot be avoided. This is because, like in the traditional setting, the council would like to discuss matters until common grounds are arrived at. Through this, the council seeks to have most of the members agree with any decision taken. The case of the majority imposing its view on the minority is avoided as all members of the council will feel like being listened to before the decision is made.

Gyekye expresses this view aptly when he opines: "In councils and assemblies in most traditional African societies decisions are arrived at by consensus. In all kinds of deliberations, the aim is to achieve consensus."<sup>34</sup> Africans use various means to build consensus. Apart from meetings of the council of elders, assemblies are held from time to time to discuss matters with the populace. As a way of building consensus, all views will be taken at such meetings before decisions are arrived at. Meetings may delay because of the need to reach consensus but it helps in advancing the cultural values of soliciting commitment of individuals, building solidarity within the group and boosting the trust of the leadership.

### Appropriate Personal Conduct

Personal conduct or character of leaders is also important for earning the approval of the people in the church. The conduct of church leaders is essential for either strengthening or weakening their authority. Character influences the level of consent that leaders gain from their people.<sup>35</sup> Qualities that are looked for in leaders include integrity, honesty, sincerity, reliability and personal morality. I Peter 5:3 urges leaders to be examples to the flock. The Bible demands that leaders must be above reproach and be blameless (I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6). Two character flaws that quickly erode and weaken leaders' authority and make them ineffective in Africa are sexual immorality and pride. Pastors who engage in these are resented. They suffer from lack of recognition and rejection and their level of authority suffers. In many denominational churches, pastors who engage in sexual immorality are either disciplined or removed from office. In AICs where the founders are also the leaders, it is not easy to sanction immoral leaders. What members would therefore do is to desert the church as they see the leader as losing integrity. It is not difficult for churches to collapse due to such misconduct of leaders.

The concept of personal conduct of the leader is also seen in the cultural setting where the chief is expected to uphold the moral and ethical standards of the society. This is formalised in the swearing of oath at the installation ceremony and becomes a binding contract between them and the people. Dzobo lists, among others, the following as qualities of the chief: "He must be matured and honest, modest and patient, respectful and respectable, hardworking and speak the truth to both young and old without fear or favour. He must be intelligent and understanding."<sup>36</sup> On the day of installation the chief is presented with a code of ethics which he agrees to abide by. Failure to live according to the code may have serious consequences including destoolment, depending on the gravity. The code forbids the chief from going after the wives of other men, stealing, laziness, drinking in public or getting drunk, embezzling funds or quarreling with his subjects and many others.<sup>37</sup> In similar ways, African Christians expect their leaders to uphold biblical moral standards.

### Competent Leadership

The concept of competence is also critical in impacting authority in African Christianity. To be competent means that the leader is experienced, informed, skilled, an expert and trained appropriately for the position.<sup>38</sup> Competence results in skillfulness, effectiveness and efficiency in performing one's role. The more competent people perceive a leader to be, the more likely they are to accept his authority.<sup>39</sup> Competent people are regarded as authority figures in the church whose input will be sought on important matters. An important area where church members expect the pastor to be competent is that of preaching and teaching of the word. This is because churches consider these as the key responsibilities of their pastors and expect them to teach and preach captivating and life transforming messages. In addition, pastors who are competent in other pastoral roles like the celebration of the Eucharist, healing and deliverance, leading prayer, visitation

<sup>33</sup> Twumasi, "Medical Systems in Ghana" 15.

<sup>34</sup> Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 116.

<sup>35</sup> Engstrom, *The Making of a Christian Leader* 113; Lawrence O. Richards and Clyde Hoeldtke, *A Theology of Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 137.

<sup>36</sup> Dzobo, *The Chief and His Elders*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Dzobo, *The Chief and His Elders*, 17; Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions*, 36.

<sup>38</sup> Kwasi Kodua Addai-Mensah, "Fulfilling Your Ministry with Commitment and Competence." In *Church Leaders' Challenge Book 6* (Accra: Challenge Enterprises of Ghana, 2009), 90.

<sup>39</sup> Engstrom, *The Making of a Christian Leader* 112.

and effective leadership, easily enhance their influence and therefore authority.

In the traditional setting, chiefs must also be competent in performing their duties as leaders of their people. After selection for the position of a chief, the candidate will be confined for a period of time. During the time of confinement, they are educated and trained on all aspects and roles of the office. Part of the training is on his duties as the leader of the people. The functions of the chiefs vary from one ethnic group to another. However, generally speaking, they seek and promote the general welfare, prosperity and progress of their people and chiefdom.<sup>40</sup> As Dzobo puts it, to fulfil this general role, the chief looks upon himself as the kind and understanding grandfather (Nana or Togbe), a patient teacher, an arbitrator and peace-maker, a priest at large and the commander-in-chief of his men of valour in times of war and emergency.<sup>41</sup> The priestly role of chiefs demands that they perform sacrifices, offer prayers and take up other spiritual roles pertaining to the office. The chief is also seen as an epitome of wisdom which he uses to address issues and challenges of the members and the community as a whole. It is this concept of competency that church members have and thus expect similar actions from their leaders.

### The Final Authority Question

The question that arises from the discussion thus far is: “Who has the final authority in the church; pastor, board or members?” Sometimes there are reports of struggles between the pastor and the church board as to who has the final authority. To quote Jon Byler, “Many pastors probably wish that they could do away with their boards and run the church alone! And some boards are looking for ways to get rid of the pastor.” This is to say, the struggle between pastors and their boards is real. Unfortunately, such struggles if not handled well, erode the authority of both the pastor and the board.

It is important to note that authority in the church is a delegated one. The final authority belongs to God, who calls people into ministry and positions of authority. In this wise, all members and leaders, lay or ordained, are accountable to God as to what they do with the positions they occupy and the authority granted them. The best use of authority, then, is to exercise it according to the will of God and in the interest of His people and society. To use authority arbitrarily is sin before God and should not be encouraged. God’s warning to irresponsible shepherds of Israel in Ezekiel 34 and Peter’s exhortation to the church elders in 1 Peter 5:1 – 4, should guide every church leader.

As discussed earlier, the preferred form of leadership in Africa is corporate leadership. In such a situation, authority should be carefully balanced between the pastor and church board. To ensure collective decision-making, the final decision is entrusted to the board which the pastor is also a member and usually the chairman. As chairman, the pastor has to call board meetings and moderate the same for decisions to be taken. The board cannot ignore the pastor when it comes to meetings and taking of decision, neither can the pastor ignore the board. Whenever people try to subvert the authority of others, the result is mistrust and indiscipline within the board itself which further erodes the authority of the board, including the pastor. The board should work at promoting consensus building as much as possible rather than outdoing each other.

The leader chairing council meetings is not new to Africans. Traditionally, it is the chief that chairs council meetings making it culturally acceptable. To many, it is simply abnormal for others to chair council meetings when pastors are available. Pastors are also spiritual leaders of the congregations. They, therefore, have the ultimate responsibility to see to it that the board takes good decisions. In view of that, pastors will have to put forward plans and programmes for the corporate growth of the church and welfare of members. Members will look up to them to initiate and sustain programmes for their benefit. Inability to do that is a reflection of ineffective leadership. The leader and chairman also has to ensure that programmes are communicated and implemented appropriately. Inability to implement decisions appropriately and sustain programmes, negatively affects the authority of both the pastor and the board.

Further, pastors are agents of the denominational officials that place them in the congregation. They may be personally held responsible for everything that happens in the congregation by the denominational authorities. As agents, they will have to account to their superiors on a regular basis and also in times of challenges. These arrangements compel the pastor to ensure that decisions are made in accordance with denominational policies and programmes. Challenges may arise between the pastor and the board when the latter’s interest contradicts the denominational policies being implemented. As an example, when pastors will have to remit money to their head office at a time when congregations are in dire need of finances to solve a problem, this can result in mistrust. The point here is that, as the pastor works with the church as their leader, he is compelled to satisfy denominational demands as well. It takes competence and maturity to wade through such challenges successfully and sustain the authority of leaders.

The church board collectively has the spiritual and mundane oversight responsibility of the congregation. The board, therefore, shares the weight of leadership and responsibility with the pastor.<sup>42</sup> This calls for corporate leadership

<sup>40</sup> Dzobo, *The Chief and His Elders*, 21.

<sup>41</sup> Dzobo, *The Chief and His Elders*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Jon Byler, “*The Pastor and His Board: Conflict or Cooperation*” *Church Leaders’ Challenge* Book 2, (Challenge Enterprises of Ghana, 2003), 105.



which is popular in the African setting. It is necessary that the board and pastor work together as a team for effectiveness. It is only in working together that they can be able to achieve their purpose. In-fighting within the leadership does not only retard progress but also weakens their authority. In a healthy church, the pastor should not gain authority at the expense of the board and vice versa. Since authority expands, the board and pastor should aim at growing together. Whenever there is fight within the leadership over power and authority, it should be clear that the church is diseased rather than healthy.

In some churches like African Independent Churches (AIC) and Charismatic Churches, the final decision-making is given to the pastor in line with their belief that God speaks through the leader. Even in this situation, the pastor would have to work with the board. The board advises the pastor and sees to working out implementation of decisions. Ignoring the views of the board will impact negatively on the authority of both the pastor and other leaders. In these churches, people who disagree with their leaders would simply keep quiet or withdraw from membership. This is due to the teaching in those churches that one should not fight a man of God. As people fall out with the pastor and leave the church, the influence of the leader suffers. Again, the pastor and board will have to work together to strengthen their authority even in the AICs and Charismatic Churches.

Lack of appreciation of how authority works in the African church negatively affects both lay and ordained leaders. While cooperation within the leadership strengthens and expands authority, open disagreement between the pastor and church board depletes and shrinks it. The pastor and the board should be seen to be united and working together. In addition, church leaders must work with the people to increase their influence among the congregants. Through these they can strengthen the authority they have at their consecration or ordination and taking office.

There is the need for continuous training for pastors and their boards. Many churches in Africa train their pastors in Bible schools, seminaries and universities and through regular seminars and conferences. However, not much attention is given to the training of elders and other workers and members of church boards. It is the responsibility of pastors to provide training for their elders and other workers. Ephesians 4:12 indicates that pastors are to equip the saints for works of ministry. Jesus was a master trainer. He appointed twelve disciples whom he trained to carry out the ministry (Mark 3:13-14). The pastor will have to determine the needs of the leaders and plan training programme to address them. The training may be teaching on relevant topics and characters at regular meetings or at retreats organised for the purpose. The pastor may also recommend books to be read and contents discussed at the training sessions. Leadership seminars are mounted from time to time and the pastors may have to look out for such programmes which they will attend with some of their leaders.<sup>43</sup> Lessons learnt will have to be discussed with the rest of the group at a later time. Learning together helps group members to understand each other and work together in a team spirit. Pastors will have to adopt such strategies to overcome some of the challenges of church boards.

## CONCLUSION

Leadership authority in Africa takes its sources from multiple sources like Western, biblical and African cultural concepts. The challenge that leaders face is that although legitimate authority is important for leadership, it does not guarantee effective functioning in the African context. This is to say, although selection, calling, ordination and placement provide basis for leadership, they are no guarantee for effectiveness. Leaders cannot, therefore, depend solely on legitimacy to exercise authority effectively. They must work on functionality by promoting cherished values and through that, gain consent of the people. The pastor and the church board will have to complement each other and be seen as working and growing together instead of fighting over who has power and authority. Africans cherish corporate leadership and church leaders must incorporate such values for effectiveness. To ask members "Don't you know that I am the pastor" may be an admission that one's position is disregarded and that the leader is not enjoying the authority that goes with the position. Although the position comes with legitimate authority, leaders will have to earn the trust of their people to be able to effectively exercise that authority.

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<sup>43</sup> Byler, "The Pastor and His Board," 110.

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