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The Church in Africa: Community Around the Fire

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ABSTRACT

The paper highlights the significance of traditional African life and its impact on Christian presence, as noted by N. C. Egbulem. It is based solely on library research. It emphasizes the communal experience of gathering around the fire, symbolizing biblical fellowship in African culture. This gathering promotes mutual support, relationship-building, storytelling, and worship, reflecting essential African community and hospitality values. By embracing this metaphor, the church can cultivate a nurturing environment that encourages faith, love, and solidarity. Ultimately, this approach fosters a vibrant community that strengthens individual connections and spiritual journeys.

Keywords: Church – Fire - Community.

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1. Introduction

The Church's mission to evangelize every people of every nation brings with it the need for the evangelizer to know the nature and culture of the people whom they want to evangelize. Thus, considering the model that suits teaching about the church in the African environment does not dispel this awareness. Accordingly, one may speak of pottery, basketry, community around the fire, flock, and field; however, life in Africa is more community-based. Therefore, the model of the church as a community around the fire can be the best. Therefore, this paper provides an opportunity to learn the model of the Church as a community around the fire as derived from the African context.

2. Definition of terms

2.1 The Church

The term "church" comes from the Greek word *'ἐκκλησία*, meaning assembly or congregation. In ancient Greece, this word referred to gatherings around a leader or orator and could also pertain to military assemblies. Translators of the Hebrew Bible used it to represent the Hebrew term *קהל* (qahal), which signifies an assembly called by God (Deut 1:16).²

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² Cf. L. COENEN, "Church, Synagogue (ἐκκλησία)," in *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology*, 292.

In Hebrew tradition, qahal encompasses three aspects: a ceremonial assembly from the covenant (Deut 5:22), the Sinai community (Exod 19:17), and the present community (Deut 31:30). In the Christian Bible, ἑκκλησία corresponds to the Aramaic קְהָלָא (qalah) and reflects God's assembly of those who respond to His call. The early Church adopted the term to convey its role as the herald of Christ's Lordship, foreshadowing the anticipated parousia.

2.2 Fire

In the Jewish Scripture, the term fire is denoted as vaeî ('esh), and it is the same as the Greek term πῦρ (pur) which "refers primarily to the power contained in fire, or to the fire-place (whether in the temple or at home), with the significance attaching thereto."³ Thus, the pile of combustible or burning material is called pura. The Hebrew Bible record the term 'esh 390 times. This shows the significance of fire in the ancient world.

2.3 Community

The term community comes from the Greek word "koinonia," meaning fellowship or togetherness. In the early church, as described by St. Luke, believers devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). Koinonia signifies personal relationships among individuals. Whitson notes that "all activities affecting multiple people showcase elements of community, with stronger ties emerging when they impact individual personhood."⁴ This concept aligns with Martin Buber's idea of the I-thou relationship, emphasizing person-to-person connections.

3. The Church around the fire

3.1 The Church as community around the fire

Fire is one of the many important entities in life. With the discovery of fire in the early Stone Age, human life underwent rapid and tremendous changes. The history of religion and culture shows fire as something to which greater importance has been attached in human life both in a positive as a life-giving principle and in a negative sense, as a life-destroying force. Why, then, speak of the church as the community around the fire?

The choice of this model draws its expression from the nature of many African family structures. Many African families are extended families that stay connected almost daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly. This emphasizes the importance of community and individual awareness in Africa. John Samwel Mbiti said, "I am because we are."⁵ That means, in Africa, an individual is defined by the community, and the community is defined by individuals. In molding and fashioning the African community, each day is dedicated to the practice and evaluation of the knowledge acquired over time. The most common form of communication of knowledge to the youth was through oral tradition.⁶ The elders of the family were the official agents of this great task. Young boys were taken care of by the grandparent or his successor, while the young ladies were put under the stewardship of the grandmother, or her successor, usually the eldest aunt.⁷ Fire played a major role in the formation and sustenance of community life in Africa, as shown below.

3.1.1 Fire as an agent of expressing community life

In traditional African societies, education was primarily acquired through the rich medium of storytelling, a vibrant practice that conveyed both practical skills and profound wisdom to the youth. Unlike the structured educational systems of today, there was no formal curriculum; instead, the knowledge was passed down orally through generations. Elders, regarded as the pillars of the community, played a crucial role in this informal education system. They felt a deep sense of duty to

³ C. BROWN, Ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 652.

⁴ R. E. WHITSON, "Community," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 38.

⁵ J. S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108.

⁶ Oral tradition is way of transmitting knowledge through story telling which is likely to change based on the nature of the congregation.

⁷ Cf. V. V. M. SILAYO, "Land and Culture as Symbols of Remembrance, Ancestry, Rituals and Initiations," *African Journal on Land Policy and Geospatial Sciences*, 895.

guide the younger members of society, often correcting their missteps and offering valuable life lessons.⁸

The evenings served as a key moment for this communal learning experience. As the sun dipped below the horizon, signaling the end of a long day of labor, families gathered around crackling fires, creating an inviting atmosphere for sharing stories. Young boys were tasked with gathering firewood, which they collected with enthusiasm, contributing to the warmth and light that would facilitate the evening meetings. Meanwhile, girls busily collected wood for both the cooking needs of their families and the women gathering around the fires to share their own stories and wisdom.

This tranquil time allowed for the exchange of knowledge in a relaxed setting, as laughter and lessons intertwined. The tales spun around the fire not only entertained but also served to instill ethical values and cultural traditions, reinforcing a sense of community and responsibility among the younger generation.

3.1.2 Imparting to the youth a sense of responsibility

At sunset, a sharp and responsible boy would set fire to a certain corner on the ground (usually outside or at a certain house) and prepare a chair (Kigoda) for the elder. With the kindling of the fire, all would gather around the fire to listen to the story from the elders.⁹ During this moment, the young ones were taught how to behave in front of elders and various heroic activities specific to men. For instance, the defense of the family from theft and famine. Proper relationships with people of the opposite sex, as well as the distinctive features and practices of their family or clan, differ from others.¹⁰

The young ladies also would do the same in the kitchen. There they will gather around the fire for the sake of warming themselves on one hand and learning domestic skills, including the preparation of food.¹¹ Neither the girls nor the boys could cross to either side this time. Thus, boys were taught what was special to them as future fathers and guardians of society, while girls were taught various skills that were proper for females. If there was anything to be corrected for a particular person, it was done during this moment.

3.1.3 Respect for the Hierarchy

The gathering of the community around the fire embodies a sense of order and unity. It is a space where the respect for elders, as well as peers, is profoundly evident. In both the African cultural context and within the traditions of the Catholic Church, there is a deep-rooted acknowledgment of the roles played by elders and individuals in authoritative positions (LG, 30). It is only the appointed individual who is entrusted with the responsibility of leading the community rite during a specific celebration, ensuring its significance and proper execution.

Elders in African societies hold a vital role as official celebrants and key storytellers, steeped in tradition and wisdom. They take on the crucial task of mentoring young men and women, dedicating their time and experience to prepare them for the responsibilities they will eventually assume. This mentoring process is not just about imparting knowledge; it is a profound engagement with the values and history that shape their community's identity.

The leadership and administrative responsibilities carried out by these elders find a rich parallel in the sacrament of Holy Order within the Catholic faith. Here, men are ordained to serve, embodying Christ's authority and acting in His name. This sacramental empowerment reinforces the idea that the role of these leaders extends beyond mere governance; it connects them to a divine mission.

Ultimately, this intricate relationship between community leadership and sacramental life can be vividly illustrated through the metaphor of the church as a community gathered around the fire. It symbolizes warmth, guidance, and a shared commitment to nurturing both faith and culture, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity within the community.

⁸ Cf. G. MASHITAKI, *Kwa Heshima ya Wahenga Wetu: Asili, Mila na Desturi za Wachaga*, 79.

⁹ Cf. G. MASHITAKI, Ed., *Kwa Heshima ya Wahenga Wetu: Asili, Mila na Desturi za Wachaga*, 246.

¹⁰ Cf. G. MASHITAKI, Ed., *Kwa Heshima ya Wahenga Wetu: Asili, Mila na Desturi za Wachaga*, 85.

¹¹ Cf. G. MASHITAKI, Ed., *Kwa Heshima ya Wahenga Wetu: Asili, Mila na Desturi za Wachaga*, 79.

3.1.4 Cement community bond

The church can be envisioned as a vibrant community gathered around a warm fire, symbolizing the comfort and closeness of a loving family reunion. In this setting, members come together to share their individual lives, recount personal stories, and express their shared faith in a nurturing atmosphere. This idea resonates with the insightful words of theologian Avery Dulles, who remarked, “The church is never more Church than when it gathers at the feet of the Master, as occurs in the liturgy.”¹²

At the heart of this metaphor is the act of communal gathering, where people collectively partake in meals, engage in meaningful conversations, make important decisions, and collaboratively plan for the future. Dulles emphasizes the sanctity of these gatherings, viewing them as essential moments where the community experiences the presence of the divine. He draws a vital connection between these gatherings and the celebration of the sacraments, suggesting that each sacrament represents a profound dialogue or interaction between the living Lord and the community of believers. This highlights the significant role that shared rituals play in fostering a deeper bond among members and creating a space where faith can flourish collectively.

3.2 Fire as a means of defending against enemies

The strategic use of fire for defense has a rich history that stretches back to ancient civilizations. From the dawn of warfare, many cultures around the globe employed fire as a powerful tool to deter and confront their enemies. Soldiers often resorted to igniting the camps and hiding places of their foes, creating chaos and fear among the opposing ranks. Additionally, fire served as a means to drive away wild and dangerous animals that threatened their safety.

One particularly vivid example of this can be found in the biblical account of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea.¹³ As they journeyed through this perilous passage, the angel of the LORD positioned itself behind them to shield the fleeing Israelites from the relentless advance of the Egyptian army. This divine intervention was crucial for their deliverance (Exodus 14:19-20). Throughout the night, as darkness enveloped the scene, the LORD manifested in the form of a pillar of fire and cloud, casting a protective light over the Israelites. In this dramatic moment, as dawn approached, the LORD gazed down upon the Egyptian forces trapped in the swirling chaos and ignited a wave of panic among them (Exodus 14:24). This powerful imagery underscores the ancient and enduring relationship between fire, protection, and the dynamics of conflict.

3.3 Fire as a source of light (of heat) and domestic energy

The Holy Bible marks the faithful as children of light who are engaged in battle with the forces of darkness.¹⁴ To primitive societies and places where electricity, natural gas, or nuclear energy are an alien vocabulary, the significance of fire is irreplaceable. It was used to get light,¹⁵ to chase dangerous animals away from their residency, for domestic use, etc. The young people who did their responsibilities well were not afraid to come near the fire to warm themselves, while those who were sure of their misconduct would not dare to join the community lest they be reprimanded. Hence, the teaching of Jesus is clear when he says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). The church around the fire is the church in the light, a courageous church.

Apart from fire being used domestically as a source of energy for cooking and smelting, it was also used by people during cold weather to warm themselves. Thus, it provided a conducive environment for storytelling as food was being prepared. As long as there was enough fire, there were more stories and a sense of comfort. In this sense, therefore, the significance of fire in such a cool environment provided an occasion for imparting the youth with a sense of responsibility and self-awareness, respect for hierarchy, a sense of belonging and strengthening of interpersonal relationships.

¹² A. DULLES, *Models of the Church*, 215.

¹³ Cf. J. I. DURHAM, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, 193.

¹⁴ H. BIETENHARD, “Fire (πυρ),” in C. BROWN, Ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 656.

¹⁵ Cf. L. T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina, 358.

4. Biblical foundation of the church as community around the fire

The Bible speaks of different occasions that express the gathering assembly around, near, or in the presence of fire. Of many citations of theophany signified by fire in the Hebrew Bible, three of them will be discussed in the section, and the other will come from the Christian Bible.

4.1 The Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible contains many references to community around the fire. For instance, in Exodus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 4:11-12, people trembled because of the descent of the LORD on Mount Sinai. In the tent of meeting and later on in the Temple, fire was kept as a symbol of God's dwelling in the midst of the people (Lev 9:23-24). The pillar of fire in Exodus 13:21-22 illustrates God as the leader of the community, while in Exodus 14:24, God appeared in the pillar of fire as defender of the community. Sometimes, the community around the fire is under the divine judgment (Num 11:1-3).

4.1.1 Israel's exit from Egypt

God, in the pillar of fire in the night and the cloud in the day, led the Israelites out of Egypt. He was present in their midst as guide and leader of the way for the pilgrim people toward the Promised Land (Exod 13:17-22; 40:34-38; cf. Numb 9:15-17).¹⁶ In this incident, the pillar of fire was a sign for the people either to retire or continue with the journey. Wherever the pillar of the fire stood still, there and then the sojourning assembly of Israel camped. God in the pillar of fire and cloud is both the leader of the journey, the enlightener of the way, and the comforter of the community in the desert.

At Mount Sinai, God came in the accompaniment of fire to meet his people gathered around the mountain.¹⁷ The presence of God was accompanied by the flashing of thunder, lightning, thick cloud, and smoke, which was associated with the coming of God in the form of fire on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16-18). Looking at the significance of this event, Brueggemann says, the Exodus theophanic discourse speaks adequately about the character of the holy God, who intrudes dangerously and disruptively in order to transform people. This God lives neither in easy intimacy with us nor in remote sovereignty over us, but in odd ways comes and goes, seizing initiative and redefining reality.¹⁸ Moses, as leader of the assembly, led people out of the camp to meet with God, who had descended on the mountain in the form of fire. It is in the presence of this great fire that Israel received the gift of the Decalogue together with the Covenant, which made them special. They became a priestly nation, holy people of God, thus having a special relationship with God (Exod 19:6). Thus, the community around the fire is the cleansed community ready to be instructed in a Godly way and form an enduring commitment with God (Exod 19:14-25; Isa 6:4-8).

4.1.2 The victory of Judith

After Judith had killed Holoferne and come back to her own, "When the people of her town heard her voice, they hurried down to the town gate and summoned the elders of the town. They all ran together, both small and great, for it seemed unbelievable that she had returned. They opened the gate and welcomed them. Then they lit a fire to give light, and gathered around them" (Judt 13:12-13). The significance of this gathering was to get the news from Judith. What happened to her that she has come back to the Israelites? Indeed, the news from Judith was victorious because she killed the commander of the Philistine army.¹⁹ Actually, this was the gospel for those who heard it. Therefore, the fire in the context of Judith's return gives a ground for the proclamation of the gospel, and the community around the fire is the one called and gathered for the purpose of hearing the Gospel.

4.2 Christian Bible

Christian writers used the term *pur* 71 times to denote the power contained in fire. Like in the Hebrew Bible, in the Christian Bible, even the mission of the Church is marked by the event of the Holy Spirit who descended on the praying community and marked the beginning of their preaching *ad extra*.

¹⁶ Cf. J. I. DURHAM, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, 186.

¹⁷ Cf. L. T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina, 42.

¹⁸ Cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, "Exodus," In *New Interpreters Bible*, 838.

¹⁹ Cf. I. NOWEL, "The Book of Judith," in *New Collegeville Bible Commentary*, 712.

In illustrating community around the fire in the Christian Bible, two periods are in order: the pre-paschal and post-paschal periods.

4.2.1 Pre-Pascal Period (Mark 14:53-72; John 18:35)

Before the death and resurrection of Jesus, the community around the fire was a rebellious community that denied the Master. This community is best seen in the trial of Jesus. The Gospels narrate that, among the people who gathered around the fire during the trial of Jesus are the Sanhedrin, the guards, Peter, the witness bearers, Jesus, the Servant girl who also was the interrogator of Peter, and the bystanders (Mark 14:53-72). The presence of these people describes the universalism of the community around the fire. It is made possible by the references to “all the chief priests, and the elders, and the scribes” (Mark 14:53) and “the whole Sanhedrin” (Mark 14:55) being present, and according to M. Sanhedrin 1:6, the Sanhedrin consisted of seventy members plus the High Priest. Since number seventy stood for all nations, it could mean that all the people were around the fire.²⁰

In this context, all people of different calibers, occupations and status gathered around the fire to warm themselves. The one who brought people together around the fire was Jesus. However, the community sought at least an appearance of legal propriety to justify their intention to have Jesus killed.²¹ The entire crowd did not cling to the true light, but rather to the artificial one. The whole process is centered on the denial of Jesus, who also is the true light (John 8:12). Notwithstanding, Peter was following at a distance. “His following at a distance is symbolic of his discipleship: he desires to be loyal, yet is still hesitant and safely distant from Jesus.”²² He has neither understood nor accepted God’s plan for a suffering servant. Therefore, he warms himself at the man-made light/blazing fire (φως),²³ while denying Jesus, who is the true light. “Peter’s unfaithfulness to the person of Jesus expressed anxiety for his own safety and the determination to seek approval from the bystanders rather than from the Lord.”²⁴

4.2.2 Post Pascal Narrative

The fire after the Paschal Mystery is a fire of unity and cooperation. The members around the fire are cooperative with the Master.

4.2.2.1 The Risen Lord on the Seashore (John 21:9-20)

St. John, in accounting for the appearance of the Risen Lord to his disciples at the seashore, describes that meeting in a more positive way, since Jesus speaks and his disciples respond positively. Jesus asks them to bring some of the fish that they had caught, and they brought. He invites them to have breakfast, and they respond. No one dared to question the authority of Jesus because all had knowledge of him as their Master. It is around this harmonious gathering that Jesus commissioned Peter the duty to tend and feed the lambs and sheep.²⁵ Generally, the community of disciples which met around the fire had a conversation with the Risen Lord. It displayed a positive attitude compared to the pre-Pascal period. Actually, this fire functioned not only as a uniting factor, but also detached these men from their chores, just to have time with Jesus.

On the other hand, this epiphanic event, which was characterized by the catching of so great a haul of fish, symbolizes the success of the Church’s mission to the nations, and the giving of fish with bread to eat in a eucharistic meal.²⁶ The sheep mentioned are undoubtedly the number of faithful drawn to Jesus. Those who are called near the fire are also invited to give out their contributions; the fruits of their labour. Jesus invites people, saying, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught” (John 21:10). Therefore, each one actively participates in this gathering through their personal contribution. Secondly, the gathering community is welcomed by Jesus to share the meal, “Come and

²⁰ Cf. R. STEIN, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary, 680.

²¹ Cf. M. HEALY, *The Gospel of Mark*, 298.

²² M. HEALY, *The Gospel of Mark*, 297.

²³ The Gospel uses the term *phos* instead of *pur*. Hence, its translation best suits the blazing fire rather than simply a fire (MOLONEY, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina 1, 420)

²⁴ W. LANE, *The Gospel of Mark*, 542.

²⁵ Cf. R. E. BROWN, *The Gospel of John*, Anchor Bible, 116.

²⁶ Cf. G. BEASLEY – MURRAY, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, 404.

have breakfast" (John 21:12-13). Thirdly, the gathered people have an opportunity to express their loyalty to the Master, as it was with Peter responding to the three cumbersome and somewhat embarrassing questions of Jesus (John 21:15-17). Lastly, from this instance, the commissioning and authority are made explicitly only after a person has confessed their genuineness before the Master, when he/she can receive the commission, to feed and tend the lambs and sheep of the Master.

4.2.2.2 The Pilgrim at Jerusalem During Pentecost (Acts 2:1-8)

The people who came to Jerusalem during the Feast of Pentecost witnessed the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of fire. In this symbolism, the greatest mark witnessed by the entire congregation is the gift of tongue (Acts 2:4).²⁷ People could hear in their own language the great deeds of the Lord (Acts 2:6). The community around the fire of the Holy Spirit is that which is built up in unity and solidarity, having common understanding. Hence, the scripture testifies that, "each receptive person heard the whole company of the disciples speak in his or her language!"²⁸

4.2.2.3 Domestic Eucharistic Gathering (Acts 20:7-12)

The early Church met in homes for the celebration of the Holy Mass. The book of Acts reports that it was on the first day of the week, Sunday, when people in Greece met around the fire for the purpose of celebrating the Eucharist (Acts 20:7-8). In that celebration, they lit many lamps in the room upstairs where people were gathered. In this community around the fire, the members were so vibrant and attentive to listen to St. Paul, the main presider.²⁹ Fire was the sole agent that facilitated Paul's long homily, which led to the report of one youth who was overcome by sleep and fell to the point of losing his life, which was then restored (Acts 20:9-10).³⁰

5. The fire in the tradition of the church

In the tradition of the Church, we do not have an explanation of the model of the Church around the fire. However, the symbolism and significance of fire are very rich. St. Ignatius of Antioch, for instance, in his letter to the Romans, describes fire as an agent of sacrifice, and so, he considers his martyrdom as offering a sacrifice to God, and the way to become a true disciple of Jesus.³¹ St. Ignas goes on to enumerate that the one who gives oneself to suffer in fire, sword, or to wild beasts, is close to God.³² However, in the Didache, St. Justin, and St. Irenaeus applied the prophecy of Malachi 1:11 to the Eucharist. The Holy Mass, they said, was the pure offering, the always-and-everywhere offering of incense to the God of Israel.³³ He identifies this light with Jesus,

St. Jerome, proud of the Church's celebration and worship, praised the tradition of lighting the candle. And so, he says, "whenever the Gospel is to be read the candles are lighted, although the dawn may be reddening the sky, not of course to scatter the darkness, but by way of showing our joy."³⁴ In this sense, therefore, the community around the fire is the joyous community.

In his commentary on Leviticus, Baruch Levine wrote: "Christian worship in the form of the traditional mass affords the devout an experience of sacrifice, of communion, and proclaims that God is present. The Christian church, then, is a temple."³⁵

6. Theological importance of fire

Fire has played a crucial role in life, from domestic use to trades. In warfare, it was destructive, while in metalworking, it was essential for forging (Isa 44:12). It also symbolized purification in religious contexts (Lev 13:52; Num 31:32; Isa 6:6). In the Bible, fire represents God's presence, guidance, and

²⁷ Cf. L. T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina, 45.

²⁸ F. D. MACCHIA, *A Tongue of Fire*, 345.

²⁹ Cf. A. BAUMSTARK, *On the Historical Development of the Liturgy*, 54.

³⁰ Cf. L. T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina, 358.

³¹ Cf. ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Letter to the Romans* 4:2-4.

³² ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Letter to the Smyrna* 4:2.

³³ S. HANN, *Signs of Life*, Article 24.

³⁴ ST. JEROME, *Against Vigilantius*, no. 7.

³⁵ B. EMIL, "Commentary on Leviticus," quoted by S. HANN, *Signs of Life*, Signs of Life, Article 24.

sacrifice, underscoring its significance in personal spirituality and communal worship, fostering unity and shared faith among believers.

6.1 Heavenly glory and appearance of the Lord

Fire is used considerably in the Bible as a sign which describes divine glory. In his vision, St. John saw the exalted Christ having eyes like flames of fire (Rev 1:15; cf. Ezek 1:27; Rev 2:18; 19:12). This expression harmonizes with the fact that fire has a gleaming effect which makes it impressive. Thus, St. John continues to describe the heavenly beauty, saying the angel in Revelation 10:1 has legs like pillars of fire. Again, before God's throne there burn seven torches of fire (Rev 4:5; 15: 2).³⁶ Much less than that, the Holy Spirit himself being of heavenly origin, appears in tongues as of fire (Acts 2:3, John 3:8). Therefore, those who come near fire they approach this heavenly glory.

Many Biblical texts associate theophany with fire, as seen in Acts 7:30 and Hebrews 12:18, which describe God as a blazing fire. Moses experienced this when he encountered the burning bush, which was not consumed. God called to him from within the bush, prompting Moses to respond, "Here I am" (Exod 3:2-4). This moment highlights how God reveals Himself through fire, representing a sacred calling and instruction.³⁷

6.2 Divine judgement and divine communication

Right from the fact that the LORD is present among his people as the Judge, who brings deliverance as well as punishment, the fire which accompanies him becomes the expression of these aspects; deliverance and punishment. In the case of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, the function of fire is clearly portrayed.³⁸ It acted as the mark of divine judgment (Gen 19:24; Rev 21:8). The Egyptians experienced the same scene in the bargain to let Israel go to their Promised Land (Exod 9:24). Through fire, God demonstrated his holiness as he is completely other. It is out of this divine attribute, the issue of divine judgment comes on board since, "Fire is a symbol of the LORD's holiness as judge of the world, and also of his divine power and glory (Exod 24:17; Isa 6:1-4; Ezek 1:27)."³⁹ Many prophets in the ancient Israel had spoken of divine judgement in term of consuming fire. Hence, the enemies of the LORD will be destroyed by fire and the sword (Isa 66: Lev 10:2; Num 11:1; 16:35; 2 Kings 1:10; Amos 1:4,7). 15; Ezek 38:22; 39:6; Mal 4:1).

God has various ways to speak to the people. However, his way of speaking to people goes hand in hand with their level and capacity to understand his revelation.⁴⁰ The Hebrew tradition shows plainly that the LORD speaks out of the fire (Exod 3:2-5; Deut 4:12, 15, 33). In the various theophanies it may be seen that when the LORD appears, he is accompanied by fire (Gen 15:17; Exod 3:2-6; 19:18; Jdg 6:21; 13:20; Num 14:14; Isa 4:5; Ezek 1:27).⁴¹ In Africa as it was in Ancient Near Est, fire is used as a means of communication. For instance, for the hunter-gatherer societies, in order to give immediate information, the fire was set, and as the smoke went up, people understood that they were required to meet urgently.

6.3 Divine presence and guidance

Fire is a sign of divine guidance as seen in the symbol of pillars of cloud and of fire (Exod 13:22; Num 14:14).⁴² He moves in front of the qahal in a pillar of fire by night. Whenever fire is transposed, a journey also takes place. Whenever the pillar of fire stood, the assembly of people retired to the camps. In the Bible, fire frequently symbolizes God's presence and guidance.

³⁶ H. BIETENHARD, "Fire (πυρ)," in C. BROWN, Ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 656.

³⁷ Cf. J. I. DURHAM, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, 31.

³⁸ Cf. D. C. YOVAN, *Fire and Brimstone and God's Love: The Dual Aspects of Divine Nature in Biblical Theology*, 2.

³⁹ H. BIETENHARD, "Fire (πυρ)," in C. BROWN, Ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 655.

⁴⁰ Cf. J. I. DURHAM, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary 31. The same idea was presented earlier by W. R. SMITH, *The Religion of the Semites*, 193-194.

⁴¹ Cf. D. MUNTEANU, "The Divine Fire in All Things: Orthodox Cosmology in Dialogue with Science," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*, Vol. 4 (2), 29-30.

⁴² Cf. J. I. DURHAM, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, 186.

6.4 Sacrifice and worship

Fire is a crucial element in the act of worship, especially in offering burnt offerings and atonement (Gen 22:9-13; Lev 1:3-4). "The fire on the altar must be kept burning; it must not go out. Every morning, the priest adds firewood, arranges the burnt offering on the fire, and burns the fat of the fellowship offerings on it. The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out" (Lev 6:12-13). The perpetual fire on the altar signifies the continuous need for atonement and the unending nature of worship and dedication to God. The church has continued this tradition by preserving light beside the tabernacle, the perpetual light. The main reason for this tradition comes from the fact that, in the liturgy, we worship God not only with all of our senses, but God himself is well pleased when our whole being is involved in the worship. God says this about the high priest Aaron: "I chose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense" (1 Sam 2:28).

Incense became the most emblematic form of worship. Grains of incense, once dropped into a thurible with hot coals, rise heavenward as fragrant smoke. It's meant to be an outward sign of the inner mystery that is true prayer. "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you," said the Psalmist (Ps 141:2). The metaphor still worked for St. Paul (see Phil 4:18). A Jewish theologian of the first century, Philo of Alexandria, saw the freedom of the censor's smoke rising heavenward as a symbol of mankind's spiritual and rational qualities, fashioned after the divine image. When incense was offered with animal sacrifice, he said, it symbolized the entirety of human nature, body and soul, given to God.⁴³

6.5 Purification and refinement

Fire often symbolizes purification and refinement, removing impurities and purifying what is precious.⁴⁴ Farmers use fire to clear the farms, and in metal extraction, fire removes the impurities from the metals, especially diamond. So, does the Holy Bible affirm, "But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver" (Mal 3:2-3; cf. 1 Pet 1:7). This imagery reflects God's process of purifying His people, preparing them for His purposes.⁴⁵ In connection with the last judgement, St. Paul speaks of fire as the measure of the quality of our doings. "The work of each builder will become visible, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done" (1 Cor 3:13).

In Greek, fire was used for ritual cleansing, offering after childbirth or after a death, and the various feasts of purification. "According to Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 540 BC), fire is the basic element of all things: the world is a movement of fire, which is undergoing a constant process of change and is identical with the deity (or logos)."⁴⁶

6.6 Forgiveness and sin covering

The smoke from the burning frankincense was used by the priest to ask pardon for the sins of the people (Numb 16:41-50), and to cover his own sinful nature before the holiness of God on the Day of the Atonement, so that he may approach mercy's city for reconciliation (Lev 16:11-14). "The earliest Christian documents, the Didache, St. Justin, St. Irenaeus, applied the prophecy of Malachi 1:11 to the Eucharist. The Holy Mass, they said, was the pure offering, the always and everywhere offering of incense to the God of Israel."⁴⁷ Thus, ascribing to the sacrifice of a holy mass the title of sin offering sacrifice.

⁴³ S. HANN, *Signs of Life*, Article 23.

⁴⁴ Cf. K. B. ASSENGA, *African Traditional Religion's After Life Beliefs and Christian Faith on After Life*, 80. The church also has this notion in her teaching about purgatory.

⁴⁵ Cf. D. F. WATSON – T. CALLAN, *First and Second Peter*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament, 26.

⁴⁶ H. BIETENHARD, "Fire (πυρ)," in C. BROWN, Ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 654.

⁴⁷ S. HANN, *The Signs of Life*, Article 23.

7. The advantages of the community around the fire

The key note on this model is the coming together of different people in the presence of the fire. Those who are gathered are active participants in the ingathering activities. Hence, the following notes are vivid.

7.1 Cooperation

In the principle of cooperation, one should be for all and all for one. The model of the church as the community around the fire also brings to mind the idea of cooperation in the community. The gathered people are characterized by warmth, sharing, and unity.⁴⁸ That is why the Scripture put it plainly that,

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So, Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord (John 21:9-12).

The fire in this gospel’s context serves as a focal point for fellowship with the risen Christ, symbolizing communion and shared life.⁴⁹ The Risen Lord confirmed Peter in his calling to be a shepherd of his sheep, and thus, “he entrusted his sheep to Peter, as the Father entrusted them to him, and that thereby he gave him the authority that goes with the shepherd’s office.”⁵⁰

The number of fish caught in the nets is translated by various theologians differently. Some, like St. Jerome, see number 153 as constituting the mission of the apostles that yielded to a gathering of all nations to Christ, hence a sense of universalism. Others like St. Augustine see number 153 as a summation of 1 to 17, hence seven refers to the seven Spirits of God, while number ten refers to the Decalogues.⁵¹

7.2 Unity and love

Jesus emphasized the importance of love and unity among his followers. Without love, the gathering together is impossible. Therefore, Jesus himself commands us to love one another (John 13:34-35). The telos of his command is in the building of the community. Thus, in Africa, observation of justice in dealing with others, respect for other people’s property, respect for the elders, hospitality, and kindness to the weak and strangers and the sharing of material goods, were the marks of a good person.”⁵² The love and unity that Jesus commands are best cultivated in intimate, close-knit settings, akin to a group of friends or family gathered together.⁵³

7.3 Mutual support and care

Faithful to his office, St. Peter exhorts the elders of the community to embrace fatherly care for the people entrusted to him. He says, “Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it- not for sordid gain but eagerly” (1 Pet 5:1-2). St. Paul extends this attitude not only to the leaders of the community but to all the faithful: “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves” (Rom 12:10). Mutual support is the core aspect of the community.

In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, the Holy Father refers to the church in Africa as the Family of God, the Community of Believers. In the opening mass for the African Synod at St. Peter’s Square, the People of God expressed their faith in full vigor, drumming and various African musical instruments.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Cf. A. BAUMSTARK, *On the Historical Development of the Liturgy*, 53.

⁴⁹ Cf. D. A. CARSON, *The Gospel According to John*, 671.

⁵⁰ G. R. BEASLEY- MURRAY, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, 407.

⁵¹ Cf. G. R. BEASLEY- MURRAY, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, 402.

⁵² K. B. ASSENGA, *African Traditional Religion’s Belief in After Life and Christian Faith on After Life*, 63.

⁵³ Cf. G. R. BEASLEY- MURRAY, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, 401.

⁵⁴ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Post Synodal Apostolic on Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 6.

7.4 Eating together

Sharing meals is a significant aspect of fellowship and community. As people in Africa gather around the fire in the evening, not only do they tell the story but also eat together. Parallel to this tendency, on the day of resurrection, Jesus accompanied the disciples of Emmaus, and when evening came, Jesus sat with them for a meal. It is during this moment that the disciples recognized him (Luke 24:30-31). This aspect fosters recognition, understanding, and deeper relationships, much like the communal experience around a fire, in fostering a sense of community and intimacy.

7.5 Teaching and encouragement

The early church emphasized teaching and mutual encouragement in their gatherings. In Africa, during the evening, the elder and the youth sit around the fire, where the elder teaches the younger ones.⁵⁵ Those who seem to struggle with their weakness or imperfections are encouraged to create heroic character (virtues), the arrogant are corrected, and the cold-hearted are awakened. Thus, St. Paul reminds us that, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God" (Col 3:16). This teaching finds itself at home in African context of the evening fire. There, those who are gathered around the fire to warm themselves, share wisdom, teachings, songs, riddles, proverbs and stories, encouraging and building each other.⁵⁶ In his address to the bishops of Africa, Pope John Paul II said,

"Just as at Christianity's beginning the minister of Candace, Queen of Ethiopia, rejoiced at having received the faith through Baptism and went on his way bearing witness to Christ (cf. Acts 8:27-39), so today the Church in Africa, joyful and grateful for having received the faith, must pursue its evangelizing mission, in order to bring the peoples of the Continent to the Lord, teaching them to observe all that he has commanded (cf. Matt 28:20)."⁵⁷

Leaders and people form a very crucial part of the gathering community. This is the first condition for active participation in the liturgy, that is, to recognize that the liturgical assembly is constituted by the gathering of the church, consisting of leaders and people.⁵⁸ Considering that the elders are tasked with the whole process of bequeathing the clan's heritage to the youth, they did their work diligently. So, does St. Peter reminds the pastors of soul, "Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it, not for sordid gain but eagerly" (1 Pet 5:1-2). In this model, the task of preaching is not only left to the elders but also to the brothers and sisters. As each one fulfill his/her task, the words of the letter to the Hebrew becomes vivid, "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebr 10:24-25).

Just like active participation of the members is expected to be seen in the acclamations and responses of the faithful to the priest's greetings and prayers, so do the young people around the fire. In this sense, the gathered faithful contribute to every form of the Mass, so that the action of the entire community may be clearly expressed and fostered.⁵⁹

7.6 Prayer and worship

The use of fire has enabled people to meet constantly, hence facilitating the whole journey for prayer and worship, which are central practices of the church community (Acts 1:14). The community gathered around the fire is a praying community. To fight against the cold weather, all the people would gather around the fire to warm themselves. Hence, fire has been a uniting factor for the community members, especially in the evening and morning.

Even today, in our celebrations, we light candles in our worship. Of notable significance is the Easter candle, which is lit during the Easter Vigil. Before any other celebration, the whole congregation

⁵⁵ Cf. N. C. EGBULEM, "Mission and Inculturation: Africa," in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 1096.

⁵⁶ Cf. N. C. EGBULEM, "Mission and Inculturation: Africa," in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 1096.

⁵⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Post Synodal Apostolic on Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 6.

⁵⁸ Cf. C. SIMON, *Liturgical theology: The Church as Worshipping Community*, 152.

⁵⁹ Cf. C. SIMON, *Liturgical theology: The Church as Worshipping Community*, 153.

come around the fire, whereby a priest blesses it, lights the easter candle and puts some into the thurible for the procession. The Easter candle itself functions as a symbol of Jesus Christ, who consistently spoke of his Gospel and even of himself in terms of light. "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).⁶⁰

In our celebrations today, fire takes a special position. In the liturgical procession, for instance, we have fire, a candle, and the burning of the frankincense beside the altar during the liturgical celebration and continuously beside the tabernacle.⁶¹ On the feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, which is famously known as Candle Mass, all the faithful present lit their candle. They do so in "recognizing the Savior's self-giving sacrifice manifest not only on the cross but also throughout his life, from conception to death."⁶² Therefore, this symbolism speaks louder to the modern church.

8. Limitations of this model

The symbolism of fire carries a profound and often unsettling significance, frequently associated with themes of punishment and retribution. As a result, those who gather around the fire may find themselves in perilous situations. In the Scriptures, God is often depicted as a "consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29), highlighting both His power and the potential dangers of divine presence. Consequently, any invitation to approach this fiery gathering can be perceived as a serious risk, as illustrated in Isaiah 33:14. This idea tends to resonate more deeply with individuals in rural communities, where fire has historically served as a central gathering point. However, with the rapid rise of urbanization, the importance of fire as a source of unity and connection among people has started to diminish.

Another contributing factor to this decline in the fire's symbolic significance is the social structures within many African families. In traditional patrilineal societies, not all family members are permitted to participate in gatherings around the evening fire. For instance, boys must first undergo initiation rites before they are allowed to sit alongside the elders. This rite of passage serves to signify their transition into adulthood, much like the Christian concept of initiation, where individuals receive the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist to become full members of the Church. Therefore, the meaning of these initiation sacraments can be vividly illustrated in the context of the community around the fire.

Only those who have successfully completed these crucial initiation rites gain the privilege of sitting with the elders, engaging in profound discussions about clan matters, and partaking in shared meals. Meanwhile, younger children occupy a separate space around another community fire, where they are nurtured and educated. Here, they learn the customs and values necessary to prepare for their eventual integration into the central community around the fire, highlighting the vital role of mentorship and preparation in their cultural upbringing.

9. Conclusion

In concluding this paper, it is essential to reflect on the profound insights offered by N. C. Egbulem, who emphasized that "to appreciate the impact of Christian presence on traditional African life, one must begin by recalling what traditional African life was like, particularly the ritual life of the people."⁶³ This powerful statement beckons us to delve into the complex pattern of traditional African culture, particularly highlighting the communal experiences that unfold around the fire, which serves as a poignant symbol for the African church.

Gathering around the fire transcends mere social interaction; it represents the very essence of biblical fellowship, intricately woven into the fabric of African society. In this inviting circle, members of the community come together, engaging in acts of mutual support and nurturing relationships over hearty meals. These shared meals are not just about sustenance; they are rich with flavors and stories, creating an atmosphere of connection and belonging. As elders share wisdom through vivid storytelling—episodes filled with ancestral knowledge and moral lessons—these narratives become the lifeblood that strengthens community bonds.

⁶⁰ S. HANN, *Signs of Life*, Article 24.

⁶¹ Cf. S. HANN, *Signs of Life*, Article 23.

⁶² M. CONNEL, *Eternity Today*, 204.

⁶³ N. C. EGBULEM, "Mission and Inculturation: Africa," in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 1092.

Moreover, the act of lifting their voices in worship around the fire encapsulates the spirit of joy and reverence, where traditional songs and hymns merge, creating a symphony that resonates with the very soul of the community. These practices mirror the enduring values of African culture—community, hospitality, and togetherness—which closely align with the teachings and practices of early Christian communities described in the New Testament.

Embracing this metaphor allows the church to cultivate a nurturing environment reminiscent of the warmth and familial bonds that characterize traditional gatherings. Within such a setting, members are encouraged to flourish in their faith journey, as love, solidarity, and support become the cornerstones of their spiritual growth. In doing so, the church transforms into not just a place of worship but a vibrant community where individuals are uplifted and fortified, reflecting the profound relationships that are at the heart of the African way of life. They navigate the complexities of their spiritual journeys together, forming lasting bonds that resonate through generations.

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