

# African Hospitality: Is it Compatible with the Ideal of Christ's Hospitality? Part 1

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*The ancient hospitality in Africa where, for instance, children belonged to the community and the joy or fear of one person was seen as every person's concern seems to be going down the drain. The paper seeks to revisit this African hospitality albeit in a summarized form and, without going into the details, attempts to provoke the question: Is it compatible with the ideal Christ's hospitality? The article attempts to show that there is need for us in African theology to put more energy into the study of African hospitality just as we have done with regard to the African religion as both permeate all departments of life. In the light of globalisation, it is imperative to assess whether there is any authentic contribution that African hospitality can offer to the rest of the world in the new dispensation. The material in this article is drawn from both library research and field work research where certain individuals were interviewed.*

## Introduction

African hospitality can be defined as that extension of generosity, given freely without strings attached. This explanation agrees with Echema (1995:35) who says that, 'it is an unconditional readiness to share' (give and take). It is, thus, the willingness to give, to help, to assist, to love and to carry one another's burden without necessarily profit or reward as the driving force.

Olikenyi (2001:102) explains that, African hospitality which he contends is a vital aspect of existence in Africa in general, is one of the few facets of Ancient African culture that is still intact and strongly practised today by most Africans in spite of the forces of recent external influence or even internal pressure. He quotes Uzukwu (1998:158) who develops this view further when he says, "Despite the destabilization of traditional life by colonialism, foreign world views, technology and modern living...African hospitality has held rather well to the extent that it could be described as a way of being an African."

African hospitality is simply African cultural and moral values, which are not

theoretical, but a way of life (Moila 2002a:1). This shows that the concept of hospitality is so wide that, like African religion, it permeates all spheres of African life (see Mbiti 1969:1f).

While defining African hospitality as the brotherhood or sisterhood 'between the members of the same family group and/or of the same clan', Moila (2002a:2) goes on to say that—

Each member of the same family group is bound to offer food and shelter to any member of his or her group who needs it. However, it is also an African custom to offer hospitality even to strangers. Hospitality is perceived and practiced by Africans as open-handed, instinctive and the most natural thing in the world.

By saying that hospitality as practiced by Africans is 'instinctive and the most natural thing in the world', Moila is alluding to the fact that African hospitality is different from other versions that are practiced in many other parts of the world, especially in Europe and North America, as we shall see in this paper.

On the whole, this paper is very important in that hospitality in Africa is not an academic theory that is simply exercised by 'arm-chair' practitioners but a practical way of life on how people live their lives on a day-to-day basis as this study seeks to show. Moila (2002:1) explains the practicality of African hospitality as seen during his early upbringing and by so doing, he gives us a general picture of what African hospitality is all about and how it is lived and practised right from our villages. He says—

African hospitality is one of those African cultural and moral values, which my parents absorbed into their Christian lifestyle. Not only my parents, but also all Christians on the farm where I grew up did this.... The farm was divided into Christian and non-Christian villages. However, these two villages did not prevent interaction between people. At all times, actions of hospitality transcended those physical divisions. For instance, on Christmas day or any other festive day, children from both villages would go from one house to another to sing and to be given bread or cakes and drinks. As such, Christmas day was used by families of both villages to display generosity and hospitality to all children on the farm.

Moila's experiences, no doubt, represent the upbringing of all African children to adulthood. Its importance is clearly seen when we consider the fact that we are writing on African hospitality as African Christians. As believers in the gospel of Christ, the interaction between Christ's ideal hospitality and African hospitality is the basic aim of this paper.

Another point worthy of note is the fact that African hospitality will be described, defined and interpreted on the basis of which it is concluded that 'African hospitality is a powerful tool for gluing the community together as well as the community with ancestors and God' (Moila 2002a:1).

Finally, the significance of this paper is seen in Oduyoye's (2001:94) words when she says that hospitality is 'inherent in being African, as well as in adhering to a religion that derives from the Bible...'. It is 'given a religious meaning, and linked with the ancestors, Christ and God'. As we study on African hospitality, its ancient practices, its present challenges, its compatibility or incompatibility with the gospel of Christ, we need to underline Archbishop Tutu's words that—

Africans believe in something that is difficult to render in English. We call it *ubuntu*, *botho*. It means the essence of being human. You know when it is there and when it is absent. It speaks about humaneness, gentleness, and hospitality, putting yourself on behalf of others, being vulnerable. It embraces compassion and toughness. It recognizes that my humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together (Tutu 1989:69).

It is therefore of paramount importance to study our history through focussing on ancient African hospitality as we examine its compatibility with Christ's ideal hospitality in modern day Africa.

### Socio-Religious Manifestation of African Hospitality

Prof. Moila (2002a:3-5) best illustrates the three ways in which African hospitality manifests itself.

#### *Religious Life*

Firstly, African hospitality in the religious domain includes relating well with the ancestors. That's why, in ancient African hospitality, and to an extent in the

modern day, it is customary 'when drinking beer, to pour out the last few drops in the calabash for the ancestors'. Similarly, it is believed that, when a pot of beer cracks, it is said to be good for the ancestors are eating (Mönnig 1978:61). Moila (2001:3) contends that a Pedi woman will always dish out food for the ancestors when she is cooking.

This is common even among the Kikuyu, the Giriama, the Digo, the Chonyi, the Kamba and the Taita communities of Kenya. The East African communities characteristically pour anything, including water, tea, or food on the ground as a way of seeking blessings from the ancestors before they consume it<sup>1</sup> thereby appeasing them. It is equivalent to prayers offered in modern African Christianity before we take meals. This symbolises a harmonious relationship between the living and the living-dead.

Who are the ancestors? It is the deceased people who become ancestors and still remain part of the community. They are also referred to as the living-dead. Traditionally, Healey and Sybertz (1969:211) say that 'the living dead were remembered in the oral tradition for five generations. Their being remembered or not depended on how much good they had done on earth, especially hospitality to others'. For as Dickson (1984:198) points out—'In African thought those who become ancestors must have lived exemplary lives; it is not everyone who dies who becomes an ancestor, so that the cult of the dead is not to be equated with that of the ancestors'.

The question of ancestorship and hospitality is very crucial in Africa. For example, the Fang of Gabon believe that an ancestor passes by in the person of a stranger and, therefore, a stranger should be given very kind and warm treatment (Olikenyi 2001:105). Similarly, the Balsa treat strangers, orphaned, handicapped people, beggars and lepers very well because of their belief that their ancestors visit them in these forms (Olikenyi 2001:105).

Generally, in most African communities, it is believed that unexpected guests are the embodiment of ancestors; hence they are given the ancestors' food (Moila 2002a: 3). In such hospitality, it means communing with ancestors through such impromptu services to guests, hence maintaining a relationship through the practice of hospitality.

*Social life*

Secondly, African hospitality manifests itself through social life, which is also fully permeated by religion. In so doing it serves to sustain a holistic community (Moila 2002a: 3). For that reason, activities such as dancing and singing are 'perceived as hospitable activities in that they bind the community together' (Moila 2002:3). Africans dance to celebrate every 'imaginable situation—joy, grief, love, hate, to bring prosperity, to avert calamity. In addition, singing and joyful conversation enable African people to minimise tensions within enclosed community' (Thorpe 1991:116). Idowu (1973:84) observes that—

Songs constitute a rich heritage for the whole of Africa. For Africans are always singing and in their singing and poetry, they express themselves. In this way, all their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears about the future, find an outlet. Singing is always a vehicle conveying certain sentiments or truths. When songs are connected with rituals they convey the faith of worshippers from the heart—faith in the Deity, belief in and about divinities, assurance and hopes about the present and with regard to the hereafter.

This shows that African songs are not just a concordance of notes and voices, but each song expresses a general mood and meaning of a given situation. It also shows that dance, when being accompanied by song, is used to express more than just entertainment in that it becomes a manifestation of the feeling of the individual or a group communicating their inner sentiments, expectations and aspirations. In doing this, African hospitality is clearly expressed.

Whether in the church, in the political arena, in educational institutions, or in whatever area of our social life, songs and dances have not lost their value in Africa. Chima (1994:60) stresses this point when he says—

Whether songs are used in rites of passage (birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, etc.) or in the various human activities (work, hunting, harvesting, etc.) and whether their contents refer to birds, animals, seasons or humans, songs have human life, behaviour and relationships as their main interest.

Thus, songs and dances are powerful expressions of African hospitality; and cannot be wished away when discussing this concept of hospitality.

Another common expression of our African hospitality is through community drama. As Njino (1992:7) notes—

drama is a play performed by actors based on poetry, legends, myths, past or present events, for either entertainment or teaching moral and social lessons. Thus, it is closely related to song and dance. From time immemorial, it has been used to mock evil or to mock ungodly behaviours, to caricature, to satirize and to conscientize the society on what ought to be taken seriously (Njino 1992:8).

It is also used to mock any abuse of African hospitality and to praise and to educate people on hospitality; and as we move on into the twenty-first century it will be more useful in the African church.

Song, dance and drama are accompanied by instruments like guitar (which is not originally African but a Western adaptation) “Kayamba” (an African musical instrument) and drum.<sup>2</sup> In general, instruments themselves as Njino (1992:10) notes ‘communicate particular messages’. A good example is a drum. Depending on the size of the drum, it was used to send a message of death and mourning (Mutugi 2001:82). In other words, the sound it produces matters a lot. It communicates a message of joy and celebration. It is also used as a call signal for inter-village communication. This is especially done in times of war or any other urgency (Njino 1992:10ff). In any case, the Chiefs barazas (meetings) in ancient Africa relied on drums to announce or call upon the people to assemble (Mutugi 2001:82).

Interestingly, many African radios and television stations have adopted the use of the drums to announce the different programmes. Good examples include: The National Television and Radios in Tanzania and Nation Television of Kenya—all in East Africa.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, as Moila (2002:4) contends, in the social sphere hospitality plays the role of life-affirming and life-sustaining. For indeed an individual is never alone. The Agikuyu of Kenya have a saying (proverb) that ‘he who eats

alone dies alone' (Wanjohi 1997:21). The Kamba of Kenya also have the same saying as Mbiti (2002:83) tells us. Mbiti contends that the proverb is used to highlight the value of sharing both joy (food) and sorrow (death). He further says that if there is no fellowship, there is no sharing of food during one's life, this follows that there will be no sharing of grief and bereavement at one's funeral. In this regard, hospitality means more than the sharing of experiences by members of a group. Moila (2002a: 4) goes further and asserts that hospitality eradicates loneliness. Thorpe (1991:120) affirms this when he comments about the Zulu culture—'individuals cannot exist alone. They are because they belong'. Moila (2002:4) goes on to argue that any disruption of the well being of a community calls for the members of a societal group to sit down together and share a common meal.

After borrowing heavily from many African societies such as Asu of Tanzania, the Nupe of Nigeria, the Efe (Pygmy) of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Fulani of West Africa, Mbiti aptly summarises the meaning of the ideal of hospitality in Africa—

It can be made more palatable to avoid the state in which 'a person who eats alone dies alone'. If we eat together, we can also happily die together—whether according to African Religion, Christianity, or other religious traditions. There is in each person something exceedingly valuable, wonderful, and indestructible....

In the social domain, African hospitality has a lot to do with material support on auspicious occasions such as betrothals, marriages, initiations fund-raising for medical bills, mourning for the dead, burials, education of children and social gatherings. In such situations, villagers pour in without waiting for invitation cards or any formal invitation.<sup>4</sup> This is all to do with the communality of African society where one person's happiness is happiness for all, and one person's sorrow is sorrow for all.

### *Economic life*

Another area where African hospitality is manifested is in economic life. This involves communal willingness to assist each other. From ancient times, Africans have displayed their hospitality by co-operating in works such as agricultural work, the building and repair of houses, land cultivation and

clearance of bushy areas, hunting, and fishing among other areas.<sup>5</sup> Referring to the Kikuyu of Kenya, Kenyatta (1938:42ff) goes on to show how African hospitality depends heavily on industry. By industry, it means a quality of being hard-working to promote the economic well-being of the community—while at the same time discouraging laziness as the destruction of the community. Kenyatta analyses the type of industries among the Kikuyu of Kenya, most of which were conducted communally as a gesture of hospitality. They include ironwork, hut building, pottery, basket-making, skin tanning, musical instruments, and agricultural activities.<sup>6</sup> The concept of being hard working, therefore, assumes that it is when you work hard you will have something to be hospitable with such as food, shelter, clothing and other materials.

In Africa, one cannot be mean with his or her services. For a hospitable person is one who is generous in providing food and shelter for the needy and services for whoever needs help. With regard to the Luo of Western Kenya, Obengo (1997:53) explains that a hospitable and generous person is termed as *jangwono*, which means ‘a gracious person’. This agrees with the Kikuyu community who refer to a hospitable person as *mutugi* which has two meanings: ‘a gracious person’ or/and ‘a hospitable person’. This shows how the word ‘hospitable’ is to the Africans. For to be associated with grace, it means it is a divine name. For God is also described as ‘gracious’ among the Africans. To be hospitable therefore is to participate in God’s gracious acts of doing well to others, including working to assist in improving the economic or social well being of the individual and the society in general.

As Obengo (1997:57) says of the Luo people of Kenya, a sharply contrasting term to hospitality is *ja wooro* which describes both the greedy and the stingy. Among the Kikuyu, the vice opposed to generosity and hospitality, which is referred to as *ithunu*—is almost absolute. Mean or stingy people stand condemned as social outcasts and are believed to be cursed people (Wanjohi, 1997:114). In the ancient times, they were highly stigmatised and were classed with robbers, murderers, prostitutes, witches, sorcerers, corrupt, defrauders and greedy people of the world who are short-sighted and lacking in vision (Mutugi 2001:44). A Kikuyu proverb that says, ‘A mean person refuses to serve food to one who has eaten’, is used to caution against meanness or being stingy in socio-economic life. It is reminiscent of Christ’s words that ‘He who saves his life loses it and whosoever loses it finds it’ (Mark 8:34-35).



However, African hospitality is dispensed in moderation and in prudence. This is demonstrated by the proverb—"Too much generosity depletes the cows of the one visited in the morning" (Wanjohi 1987:61). This Kikuyu proverb cautions on reckless hospitality, otherwise called in the Bible—prodigality. Another proverb that cautions on foolish dispensation of hospitality is the Ganda proverb that says, 'Visitor is a visitor for several days, and then put the person to work' (Healey and Sybertz 1996:173).

It agrees with the Swahili proverb which says that 'A visitor is a guest for two days, on the third day, put him or her to work (by giving him or her a hoe)' (Healey and Sybertz 1996:172)

These proverbs imply that a person is not a visitor forever. At one stage he or she will be accepted as one of us who now needs to work like the rest of us in various forms to promote the economic well-being of the host and the entire community. This proverb was used in Tanzania by President Julius Nyerere, during the Ujamaa policies to discourage laziness among the idlers of Tanzania, and Africa in general, who consume the sweat of others, like parasites, in the name of going for holidays and other excuses (see Healey and Sybertz 1996: 173ff).

Other proverbs that clarify that African hospitality has to be in moderation and in prudence are—'Having too many friends empties ones pockets' (Kikuyu) and 'The family oil is not to be used on strangers' (Kikuyu) (See Wanjohi, 1997:27). Thus, while acknowledging the need for hospitality they urge that prudence be the guide in its practice. It also shows that hospitality is more than welcoming people, for it also means avoiding being misused or being exploited, as the above proverbs have shown.

While acknowledging prudence as the guide in the dispensation of hospitality, many African proverbs tend to caution on the danger of the hosts themselves becoming impatient with the visitors. This is especially so in our modern economy when people are too busy in this task-oriented Africa, as the section on modern challenges will show. In addressing this, the Chewa have a proverb that says, 'treat the visitor well because she/he is like a morning dew which disappears very quickly with the morning sun'.<sup>7</sup> It is mainly used when hosts get tired of the visitors and begin to mistreat them.

Oduyoye (2001:94-5) quotes Rose-Zoe Obianga who contends that Africans welcomed Europeans and adopted European values only to find that the element of reciprocity was missing. She further says, 'Africans resisted this misuse of their hospitality and continue to do so when the outside values are deemed incompatible with African norms.'<sup>8</sup>

Oduyoye (2001:95) cites the case of Nyerere of Tanzania who linked hospitality with work and economic productivity: "treat your guests as guests for two days, and on the third day, give them hoes'. That is, put them to work doing whatever you do to sustain your hospitality. Thus, hospitality demands that we teach not only life skills but also specifically economic skills in order to prevent dependency and parasitism' (Oduyoye, 2001:95). 'All in all, hospitality and generosity,' as Moila (2002a: 5) says, 'are inseparable virtues of a good person in most African traditions.'

### *Hospitality and Interdependence*

As we have already seen, African hospitality is grounded in the fact that no one is an island in himself or herself, rather each and every one is part of the whole. Mbiti's summary of African philosophy as we have already seen is, 'I am because we are and since we are therefore I am' (Mbiti 1969:106). It best sums up the grounds on which African hospitality is built. The emphasis is on interdependence, which agrees with Pauline theology on the need to recognise other people's gifts and talents in order to edify the church and society in general (Eph. 4:10-12, 1 Cor. 12).

Many African proverbs will express this communal approach to life—'One log does not make a bridge' (Kikuyu) (Mutugi 2001:21). It means, by himself or herself alone, an individual cannot do something substantial. One needs others for advice, teaching, rebuke, correcting and training above other things (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16). Since bridges help people to cross over the river, and do businesses such as trading and general interactions, one log (read one person) cannot, without teaming up with the rest, ensure the continuity of the members of the community for, by relying on him the people may starve or be separated for lack of a good bridge to help them pass over and meet. Thus, one cannot advise himself; nor rebuke his own wrongs; nor correct or train himself; nor can he see his or her back; for a log needs other logs to combine with and make a firm bridge to ensure safety as we cross over the valleys of life together.

Another proverb explains the value of interdependence—'Wealth comes by working together' (Kikuyu) (Mutugi 2001:21). It means that for a society to prosper, co-operation and mutual support is the key to success. This co-operation is to start from a house/family, clan, and tribe to the whole nation. It agrees with Christ's caution that a house divided cannot stand (Matt. 12:25). To acquire wealth and thereby improve the nation's economic well-being, calls for genuine hard work in a co-operative atmosphere.

The clearest expression of African hospitality in terms of interdependence is found in a Kikuyu proverb that says 'All things are interdependent'. The original translation should have been 'no one can dare live without support from another person as success can not be assured'. It means that in society, everyone's contribution is important and necessary. It agrees with St. Paul when he says—

He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe. It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith...and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:10-14).

An exegesis of this will show that St. Paul contends that for the house of Christ to be completely built, it has to be erected by unity in diversity. That is, the different gifts will have to come into play, some as evangelists, others as prophets, others as pastors, others as teachers, others as administrators, others as singers and in every other way. For the church to be the way it was meant to be, all talents need to be seen as assets that will need to be given room to nourish the church and therefore edify it as St. Paul advised (1 Cor. 12-14).

Another proverb, which explains the value of interdependence in African hospitality is 'The hornless animal leans on the one that has them' (Mutugi 2001:21). This Kikuyu proverb can be compared with what the New Testament implies by fellowship among the believers in Christ. The hornless animal can refer to somebody who is a doctor but he or she is not trained as a teacher and therefore cannot teach his children so, even though his/her profession is noble, he or she needs the services of a teacher and vice-versa.

The theme of interdependence is so crucial in African culture that even in oral narratives animals have been personified thereby showing their value in African hospitality. In addition, the story below over a bird and animals will seek to demonstrate how human beings cannot afford the luxury of isolating themselves from one another as it is costly, risky and unwise.

In the Mwea plains of Kirinyaga District, Kenya, where I come from, there is a small spotted bird which is often seen where cows are grazing. The locals have given this bird different names. Some call it *Ndeithi*—meaning the one who shepherds. Others call it *Nyange*—meaning the brown or ‘the white one who moves here and there’. It can also mean, the beautiful one. Others call it *Ndieri*, which is a meaningless word when translated in the local language—the Kikuyu. These many names show the many roles that she plays plus her importance in educating humanity on the theme of interdependence.

Interestingly, this bird follows the grazing cattle as if it were the shepherd and the reason for doing this is that as the cattle moves in the grazing land, grasshoppers and other nutritious insects are disturbed and exposed. This in turn gives the bird the opportunity to feast on them easily. In this analogy, we realise that both the cattle and the bird need one another in that the bird helps to remove the ticks that cling to the body of the cow to suck its blood, with the danger of infecting the animal with East Coast Fever and other diseases; while at the same time, the bird depends on the cow, who exposes insects from their hiding places thereby giving it a chance to feast on them.

This symbiotic behaviour clearly expresses the ideal African hospitality where we see one another as possible assets at all times. It agrees with St. Paul who echoes Christ when he says that the body is a unit of many parts which need one another at all times. For ‘the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body”, it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body....If the whole body were an eye where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be...’ (1 Cor. 12:12-26).

Arguing on the value of interdependence, the retired Archbishop Tutu says—

In our African language we say, 'a person is a person through other persons'. I would not know how to be a human being at all except (that) I learned this from other human beings. We are made for a delicate network of relationships, of interdependence. We are meant to complement each other. All kinds of things go horribly wrong when we break that fundamental Law of our being. Not even the most powerful nation can be completely self-sufficient (Tutu 1989:71).

African hospitality is thus characterised by the emphasis on interdependence. It is in agreement with Pauline theology, which is echoed from Christology, especially on the assertion that we are one body, one people of God - despite the many different gifts, and talents that are bestowed upon each and every one of us by God—our maker. This calls us to share whatever talents and gifts we have for the sake of God and the general prosperity of our society as a way of encouraging one another. For 'we ought to encourage one another for the Day of the Lord is coming' (Heb. 10:25).

#### *The uniqueness of African Hospitality*

This study shows that African hospitality is different from the hospitality in the rest of the world especially in comparison with that of North America and Europe. Its uniqueness is seen in the fact that it has less pretence and a more natural approach. This is what Healey and Sybertz (1996:168) mean by their assertion that African hospitality is 'deep and sincere'.

By nature Africans are hospitable. This contributes to its uniqueness. As one of my interviewees, Eliab Mwendwa,<sup>9</sup> says—

Such hospitality is not in England where I visited. In fact, you can stay with somebody for a whole month who has never greeted you, and whom you do not know his or her name. If he tells you 'lets go for a cup of tea in a hotel', for instance, do not be surprised if he tells you to pay for yourself.

Mwendwa goes on to say that—

Eating is by appointments. You do not just join the supper or lunch when you find others eating as it is in Africa. If you are late for meals, just relax, you will eat another time.

The uniqueness of African hospitality can be argued on the basis that, unless you are invited for a meal or dinner by a westerner, you do not expect a treat.<sup>10</sup> In ancient Kikuyu hospitality, it was more distinctive than it is today in that, a hungry person, a passer-by or a stranded stranger could go to the garden, in a strange land, and if he (or she) was genuinely hungry, he (or she) would get into somebody's garden and consequently eat as many ripe bananas, sugar cane or any ripe fruit but was not supposed to carry it with him (or her) outside the spot.<sup>11</sup> The danger of this rule is that it could encourage parasitism whereby when a person does not want to work, he moves to a strange corner where he is not known and enjoys their hospitality like any other genuinely stranded stranger.

However, it is imperative, at this stage, to underscore the fact that such attitudes are changing very slowly in our modern day Africa. This can be attributed to the fact that supply in proportion to the people in our modern world is less. Surely, one cannot afford to cook such food that used to be cooked for the entire extended family and beyond! The population has grown bigger; the subdivision of land has left many with small pieces of land, which cannot adequately supply the family with enough food.<sup>12</sup> The change of attitude that is weakening our hospitality can also be attributed to the mushrooming of commercial places like hotels, restaurants, bars and bonding and lodgings which have replaced the many social gatherings for leisure such as beer drinking sessions that used to be there.

A German missionary, Rev. Johannes Beyerhaus (1994-99) was constantly surprised and overwhelmed by the unique hospitality that he received in Kenya while serving as a lecturer/missionary at St. Andrews' College of Theology and Development, Kabare, Kenya. As a lecturer, he went one Sunday to Kiathi Anglican Church to supervise his theological students who were attached there. According to him, his visit was unexpected but the local Christians insisted that he and the students should have lunch with him. Consequently, they got the food, which was cooked for a particular family while the hosting family went without lunch on that day. What struck him, considering that he was from a European cultural setting, is that these people did not display such unique hospitality grudgingly 'as this would usually be the case in central Europe', but joyfully.<sup>13</sup>

Beyerhaus further noted that whenever he attended weddings, funerals and other social events, people tended to give him the best chairs, the best places and the best food. He was overwhelmed by the fact that whenever he attended a function, even where he was less known, he was often invited to sit in front even though he did not have a function in the service (be it church service or mere social activity). This would mean, a person vacating the seat so that he could get a place to sit. This, he observed, is very different from Germany or the rest of Europe where every thing is fixed, settled and organised in advance. Guests in Europe, usually, do not make people change their sitting arrangements.<sup>14</sup>

According to both Beyerhaus and Rev. John Abdy, unless guests are invited, or are very close to the hosts, they are often seen as a disturbance of ones schedule in the European context. It is, therefore, rather impolite just to pop in without prior notice. This is often even in the case when children visit one another.<sup>15</sup>

Beyerhaus, whom I had a comprehensive interview with explained that the concept of including strangers in ones hospitality is not very well developed in Central and Northern Europe—even in the churches, strangers often do not feel very welcome. However, there are notable exceptions. It would be especially rude in German culture to pay an unexpected visit during lunch time. This contrasts sharply with the African situation where people do not mind visiting one another at any time, hence the welcome as observed earlier in this study. Conversely, visits in Germany, unlike in Africa, do not usually take much time since 'time is money' unless a visitor is a very close friend or relative. This again contrasts with rural Africa where hosts are never in a hurry to wave their guests off. Hospitality here shows itself strongly in the time taken for visitors just as we saw in the case of greetings, where hurried greetings are seen as an insult or downplaying the other person.

The reason why there is a very sharp difference between Western hospitality and African hospitality is the subject of a prolonged debate which this study is not interested in going into. But the main reason might be rooted in a fundamentally different approach to life; for whereas Africa is a relationship oriented culture where good fences do not make good neighbours, Western culture tends to be achievement oriented hence individualism as opposed to the African concept of communalism.<sup>16</sup>

In Germany, fences are put around every house and children have to respect the property of other people. This includes not going into other people's gardens, which would be a great offence in German culture. Beyerhaus explains further that there is a law in some States in the United States of America, which allows the owner of a garden to shoot an intruder even though he may have no intention of getting into the house itself,<sup>17</sup> for stepping on another people's ground is an offence serious enough to warrant killing! Obviously this is totally different in Africa, as our previous discussion has shown.

The German presence of fences, which bar the visitor from entering a compound, is a strong symbol in itself.<sup>18</sup> Indeed my interview with Rev. John Abdy (a British national) revealed that people in Southern Europe (Italy, Greece and Spain) have a much stronger concept of hospitality than people of Central and Northern Europe. In Southern Europe however, this concept of hospitality has of late been partly spoilt through the influence of tourism, that is, people discovering that they can make money from hospitality.

Our research further reveals that weddings and funerals are private affairs in Europe unlike in Africa where they are more or less communal. In Europe, one cannot go to a wedding unless he has been invited, though occasionally a drink and a small snack may be provided for everyone who has attended the church service, but the main part takes place indoors and is strictly for invited people only—usually between 35-120 persons.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in the funeral service, everybody can attend like in the African context, but again only invited guests would share the meal which follows the funeral service. Beyerhaus however, admits that in small German villages where the sense of community is still strong, this may be slightly different.

In concluding this subsection on the uniqueness of African hospitality it is essential to appreciate that in Europe, unlike in the African communities, to be invited is much more heart-warming than to be visited. On the contrary, in Africa, people feel honoured when they are being visited for as earlier observed, visitors in Europe are often seen as a burden and bother to one's schedule. Being so closely in touch with a visitor to the extent of sharing say one bed with a visitor (both Beyerhaus and Abdy contend) would make a European shudder.<sup>20</sup> Further, in Europe, there must be a very special reason



why a person has to stay overnight in somebody else's house and special guest rooms, for some special accessions are quite common.

On the whole, both Western hospitality and African hospitality have something to learn from the ideal of Christ's hospitality which is too sacrificial. Since none of us is perfect before God, we should therefore avoid being judgmental on whose hospitality is more Christ-like or less Christ-like. Rather, we should simply let Christ perfect us. In any case, as St. Paul says, 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). This therefore means, to overcome our fallenness, seeking to learn from Christ will be the solution. Otherwise, we can rightly argue that rather than African hospitality being seen as unique when we compare it with the hospitality in the rest of the world, it is Christ's hospitality that is clearly and ideally unique and worth imitation by all nations of the earth. For as Abraham, the so-called Father of our modern faith and the first biblical character to display hospitality (though some may argue that Abel was) to strangers—who turned out to be angels (Heb. 13:1-3, Gen. 18) of God—was told by God, 'I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (Gen. 12:2-3).

In imitating Abraham and Christ our Lord and Saviour, our hospitality will be truly unique and Christ-like, pleasant and worthy of envy by other nations of the world.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. These findings have come out of my social interactions with the above people for years.
2. This is an observation made through participating in both the Kenyan and South African context.
3. These examples can be noted through listening to the Radio and Television Stations.
4. This paragraph is partly informed by research before 2001 when I was working on my book on "African hospitality". It is also informed by Prof. Moila's researches (2002a:4).
5. These ideas can be found in Kenyatta (1938:42ff), Moila (2002:4) and Obengo

(1997:53).

6. For details see Jomo Kenyatta 1938. Facing Mount Kenya p. 42ff.
7. Interview with Prof. Isabel Phiri on 13th September 2003.
8. The ongoing debate in the Anglican Church on whether to accept homosexual clergy can illustrate this point in that the African churches have vehemently refused to accept the consecration of homosexual Bishops in both Europe and North America as they contend it is against African norms and biblical traditions.
9. My interviews with Eliab Mwendwa on the 8th November, 1998
10. My interviews with Rev. John Mararo on the 6th November, 1998.
11. Interview with Julius Gatimu Kaburu on the 9th November, 1998.
12. This information is gathered as a result of observation in my Kenyan context and especially the central province. It is also as a result of my interviews with Julius Kaburu Gatimu.
13. Interview with Rev. Johannes Beyerhaus, 24th December, 1998.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Rev. John Abdy is an English clergyman whom I interviewed on the 16th October, 1998.
16. This debate on communalism versus individualism is well summed by John Mbiti's and Rene Descartes' philosophies as we observed earlier.
17. Interview with Rev. Johannes Beyerhaus.
18. Obviously, this is different in cities.
19. Information gathered after the interviews with Rev. Abdy and Rev. Beyerhaus.
20. The information has come after the interviews with the two senior European clergymen/scholars.