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THE HUMAN CONDITION THROUGH AFRICAN EYES: TRADITIONAL AFRICAN PERCEPTIONS

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One could usefully reflect in *macro*view on the African understanding of human nature, as I myself have done elsewhere with respect to the African concept of *ubuntu*.[1] But here instead I want to offer one African's view of human nature, a personal *micro*view of human nature within the context of traditional African perceptions.

The task of writing about human nature is of course near impossible. A writer can only authoritatively make specific and subjective statements limited to his or her experience. Beyond that one is almost totally reliant on what others have said about human beings. So I am very aware of my personal limitations in this attempt. But in the end I suppose I am simply exploring a subject that fascinates me. In doing so, I am using my personal 'lived in' experience and my understanding of God's Word to put forward some thoughts about the nature of human beings and their cultural environments.

There was a period of my life when I was submerged in an almost purely traditional African cultural context, namely that of the Bemba people who inhabit a part of northeast Zambia. The only light in the village came from the sun by day and from the fires dotted around the village at night. The only running water was in the

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river half a mile away. Engagement with the world outside was minimal. But that did not last. Christianity and the wider world soon permeated my world, and from the late 1950s until relatively recently I have viewed both of these realities largely through the eyes of a 'borrowed' cultural milieu. Although I grew up in Zambia, my initial experiences of both Christianity and the wider world were mediated through personal and corporate Zambian experiences of British colonialism and its educational and other social legacies enshrined in present Zambia life and its social structures.

Here I want to make some first faltering steps in exploring my own traditional African world, and use perspectives from that exploration as lenses through which to view both Christianity and the wider world. I believe strongly that this is imperative not just for my own development, but in a small way, for the church as a whole. Such a process will in the end call for a certain rethinking of theological categories. Not a reinvention of historic Christian belief, but a recasting in more culturally friendly categories. As Christianity increasingly makes a home in the cultures of the majority world, the task is to make Christ the Lord in every part of every culture. I can myself only contribute a few lines of thought along which further explorations can follow, but by sharing in such a task we can together work to enact and affirm the global nature of Christianity, by ensuring that it is deeply rooted at the heart of each host culture, including those in Africa, to the honour and glory of Christ our Lord.

I take as my focus for this paper the question what it means to be human, the question addressed by that part of Christian theological discourse traditionally referred to as 'Anthropology'. Within any traditional Zambian or African approach to that question I have been unable to find any references to the image of God in human beings.[2] This may be indicative of the limitations of my research, but the language of imagery in the African languages I am familiar with is limited to physical and immaterial likeness between human generations. A son may be said to be the image of his father or a daughter the image of her mother or grandmother. But this language is never applied to the relationship between people and God, except of course in the appropriate translations of the Word of God into the many African languages.

In Africa it is impossible to reflect on human beings apart from their cultural surroundings and identity. The society-based existence is evident everywhere. Not for us any 'I doubt, think or buy, therefore I am'. Rather for us it is: 'We are, therefore I am.' A Bemba proverb makes this point in its statement that *umuntu ekala na bantu: uwikala ne nama, akaliwa* (a human being lives with people or in the company of other people: he who lives with animals will be eaten). Note the seeming choices are between living with people and living with animals. Africans find it difficult to conceive of a solitary or highly individualistic or isolationist existence. 'I am

because we are' is a very African attitude to life. Culture therefore is the best milieu for understanding human beings in most sub-Saharan African contexts. Culture is dynamic. It constantly changes and adapts to new influences and challenges. In recognition of this fact, anthropologists no longer regard human beings from purely essentialist or ontological perspectives but relationally and dynamically. That is why I begin with three stories to highlight the link between behaviour patterns and the values they reflect.

In an interview on prime-time Zambian television a bright Zambian female legal practitioner made the startling statement that all Zambian men were essentially adulterers! Adultery is a common indiscretion or sin in the world today as indeed it has been from time immemorial. Zambians are probably no more or less adulterous than other peoples in this day and age, but the statement was based on both her legal experience in litigation in marriage cases and more importantly on her own personal, perhaps bitter, experience in marriage. The topic under discussion was *polygamy*. Zambian law recognizes two basic forms of marriage: those entered into under customary law and those contracted under 'the Ordinance'.

Those married under the Ordinance incur the wrath of the law if they commit bigamy; that is, marry someone else while still married to the first spouse. But those who marry under customary provisions are entitled to polygamy if that is allowed in the culture of the families involved. These two separate systems have their own appropriate enforcement agencies. The magistrates' courts settle grievances arising from marriage under the Ordinance. The others are settled in local (customary) courts superintended by local court judges, men and women chosen for their proven wisdom and knowledge of local customs. The two systems are incompatible and trained lawyers are barred by their profession from participating in the proceedings of local courts.

The interviewee's own marriage had been solemnized under the Ordinance. Her husband was also a lawyer, and in fact one of the country's leading legal practitioners who had at one time held the cabinet post of Minister of Legal Affairs in Government. They had been married for almost twenty years. During most of that time he had maintained another marriage, entered into on the basis of tradition. Children had been born to that union. This had been a source of problems for the first wife. It was an apparently insoluble dilemma, for there was nothing she could do to change the situation. Legally he had not broken the law. The second 'wife' was not recognized as such by the system under which he had married his first wife. She might have some rights as a common-law wife, but no more. Why had the first wife not divorced him? She could certainly prove a case of adultery, which is accepted as grounds for divorce. She retorted

that the exercise would be futile because all Zambian men were the same. In sexual matters they are not satisfied with one partner. In any case, the next man she would meet and marry would behave in exactly the same manner that characterized her present husband (notice the underlying assumption of the necessity for remarriage). We will come back to this 'fact' (Zambian men in relation to sexual matters) when we deal with relationships in marriage.

Jamie, a development worker from the West, sought to befriend ordinary Zambian men in his social life. He assumed that this would be useful for his own work as well as his social life. So he joined a social club. He mixed well, sitting, chatting and drinking with them. After several years of these encounters he concluded that 'All Zambian men are adulterers and thieves.' He drew his conclusions from the basis of what dominated the men's conversations: infidelity in marriage and how to avoid paying back loans.

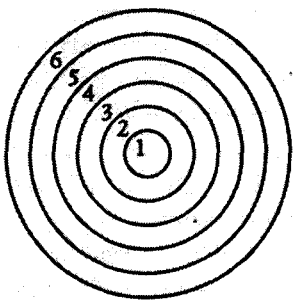
At a college in the West the bursar was heard to say that 'when it comes to money we do not trust black African students'. He made the statement partly to justify himself and partly to explain why he had not bothered to check the facts before wrongly accusing a black African student of soliciting for donations under false pretences. This is reminiscent of a comment by B. J. van der Walt, who said that the 'Westerner tends to place too high a premium on such qualities as honesty, openness, integrity, perseverance, and so on. (For that reason the Westerner will often consider the African dishonest, and the African will consider the Westerner impolite)' (van der Walt 1988:30).

One could easily dismiss these stories as either sexist or racist. But perhaps the right attitude is to ask what truth the generalizations may contain. What does that truth reveal about an adequate understanding of who I am as an African? And what values are important to me and how will these values, rightly understood, help us in communicating the timeless truths of the gospel into the ever-changing social world of the African?

Deep and surface cultures

I will employ the imagery of an onion, with its layers of skin, to help us visualize the complex cultural make-up of any human being. The concentric circles are numbered 1-6, starting with the core or the heart of the matter. At the centre, in the first circle (1), we can expect to find one's religious convictions and the essential elements of one's vision of life, the way one views oneself, the world and one's place in it, as well as values and norms that characterize one's world view. Moving outwards, the next circles, numbers 2-6, encompass material and spiritual creations such as marriage, initiation rites, work, family, healing, indeed the church and the state with its laws, customs, behaviour, habits and others. What

is in the first circle, what we might call the inner person, is not visible but completely permeates and regulates what is said and done in all the other circles. The 'inner, deeper cultural layers determine and direct the outward layers'. Whereas the latter are easier to describe, for they are clearly discernible (van der Walt 1988:20-21), the inner core, the vision of life, is more difficult to identify and describe.



There are other ways of presenting this same reality. We may borrow biblical metaphors of the tree (roots below ground supporting and feeding the stem, branches, leaves and fruit above ground), or a building (a foundation below the ground supporting a visible superstructure). Turner has developed another helpful metaphor, that of surface and deep levels of cultures (Turner 2001.74ff.). The surface, expressive or visible cultures relate to personal and public forms within our social existence. Some of these forms will be highly localized while others will be more widespread and national. This is particularly so for a country like Zambia and no doubt many others created by decree on a drawing board by imperial colonists. The boundaries drawn often cut through whole ethnic groups, consigning them to different countries. For example in the northwest of Zambia the Chokwe people now live in Zambia, Congo and Angola! Other similarly divided groups include the Ndebele of Zimbabwe and South Africa, the Ndau of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, the Tumbuka of Zambia and Malawi and so on. The national cultures in these countries hardly exist. Those that do are inventions that bear the hallmarks of the cultural forms of the colonial masters.

Some of these personal forms will relate to the way people live, including their dress codes and personal appearance, the kind of architecture and furnishings that characterize the majority dwellings, the manner in which food is prepared and eaten and indeed what kind of food is eaten. This will also include

what people do to entertain themselves and their guests, the music they create and listen to or dance to and the manner in which they dance or sing, what kinds of guests they entertain and how these are chosen. Other forms of expressive culture will include the nature of greetings, whether people prostrate themselves, kneel, shake hands, clap their hands, bow and hug or kiss each other. Funerals are of particular interest. In my culture when a person dies we, the members of the extended family, invariably drop all but the most essential of duties and gather at the funeral home for several days and nights until we bury the deceased. During the time before the burial we meet many relatives. A lot of them would have had to travel long distances to get to the funeral. We cry and mourn the dead and comfort the bereaved, we catch up on family news and increase the extended family networks and consolidate the family solidarity we so treasure. I did not really understand how significant these rituals are to me until I had to cope with the death of a close relative while living in self-imposed exile with no way of attending the funeral. I have been left with a sense of incomplete closure and some very raw feelings!

We also include under this category of surface culture the way people mark the rites of passage, including who has the right to know when a pregnancy has occurred, who names the child, what is the source of the name and how the child relates to the grown-ups. Relations between one generation and the next are always formal but relations between alternate generations are free and easy. A young child can address a grandparent as if they were equals! The functions and responsibilities of the biological father in relation to the child will be defined by culture. In my culture traditionally it is the child's 'male mother' or mother's brother who is more significant than the biological father. He is the person responsible for discipline and often the material support of the child. The expressive culture will be even more evident in the way marriages are conducted. A young Zambian man may decide to marry a young woman but the process includes the appointment of a go-between to break the news to the girl's family and to negotiate terms for payment of dowry or *lobola.*

When two cultures meet

We observe a complication in surface cultures when a major transition takes place, as has happened at the interface between the gospel and local cultures or indeed between Western culture and local cultures. Some of the results are bewildering, while others are humorous.

I had been brought up to respect my superiors and betters. One of the ways to do this was to avoid eye contact at all times, especially when receiving instructions or when one was being rebuked for misconduct. This worked well at home and all through primary education, where all the principal players were

Zambian. In my first year at secondary school, at the age of fourteen, half the class was black Zambian and the other half consisted mainly of white boys, most of whose parents were expatriates from all over the world. The teachers were all white. One day I misbehaved and Mr O'Hagan was not at all pleased and began to give me a dressing down. As a good African boy I looked down to show my respect for him and hopefully to convey my sense of remorse and contrition. Mr O'Hagan was furious and demanded that I look into his face, a thing I could not physically do!

The deaths of 'my father' were also a source of constant confusion. My father's brothers and cousins are all fathers to me. I would never address them by any other title or name but 'father'. The first time one asked for time off to go to one's father's funeral, there was a lot of sympathy all around. But when it happened again and again, all sorts of conclusions were drawn by our teachers, who thought we were inveterate liars who assumed they were all dim!

More serious is the matter of names. We do not traditionally have surnames. In this respect Bemba-speaking people of north-eastern Zambia are somewhat peculiar. Other ethnic groups in the country do indeed have clan names or surnames, which all the males bear (Mbiti 1969:119). We always receive the 'belly-button' name at birth or perhaps when the remnant of the umbilical cord drops. That is usually the name by which a person is distinguished. But if the same name is common in the village, then the distinction will be made with reference to one's parents or grandparents. The first major name change will occur when one's firstborn arrives. The 'belly-button' name falls out of use and may only be used by one's very close friends or relatives. In its place a person is called the 'father of ..." A similar name change will occur when grandchildren are born. My father's name was Mutale, his 'belly-button' name. When he went to a mission school, he needed to have a Christian name and surname. Since he already had an African name it was only necessary to choose a name from the Bible or some other English name. So at his baptism he became Joseph Mutale. All his brothers went through the same process and the result was that all four of them had different surnames to their dying day.

By the late 19505 when I started school the concept of surnames was understood to be necessary but not in the Western manner of understanding. I was always referred to as Kapolyo, son of Joseph, or more simply Kapolyo Joseph. When I went to secondary school my English headmaster decided to correct the 'mistake' that my African name should come before my 'Christian' name! So from then on I have been called Joseph Kapolyo. My older brother has a different surname from me and so do all my other brothers. What happened to names also happened in relation to houses, marriage ceremonies,

music and so on. Indeed expressive or surface cultures change quite easily. I started life in a little house of mud, poles, a thatch roof and no electricity or running water. Now I live in a medium-sized red brick house with most modern amenities. Similarly I look after my own children and play only a supporting role to the offspring of my sisters, and only if asked. However, changes are harder in the core or foundational culture.

Like the foundation of a house or the roots of a tree, this basic aspect of culture is not readily visible.

> It is a complex for which we use many different descriptive terms—a complex of axiomatic, unconsciously assumed convictions, belief systems, values, mind-sets, stances, reference points, frameworks, paradigms, and so on. These form the ultimate creative and motivating forces and controlling factors operating at the expressive or surface levels, whether in parent or sub-cultures (Turner 2001:75; see also van der Walt 1988:20).

This is the illusive, inner, deeper, foundational culture that forms the core in which resides a people's vision of life, the home of their world views. Most ethnographic descriptions of culture deal at the surface level, although studies of myth and ritual have led the way into a deeper understanding of what lies below the surface.

At coffee time this morning a veteran missionary and indefatigable world traveller was giving advice to a colleague about visiting Korea for the first time. One piece of advice was never to drink water in public while facing the audience or congregation. This it seems to me illustrates the superficial nature of most of our attempts to teach intercultural studies to those about to cross cultural boundaries with the gospel. We all too often tell them to avoid making mistakes at the surface level. It is indeed important not to drink water in public while facing the crowd or to blow one's nose in public even if one has a handkerchief, or hand over items with one's left hand and so on. But these are hardly the issue if we are going to affect people deeply with the gospel of Christ. It may well be that the 'conversion' of deep culture is something that only the natives can bring about with the help of the Spirit of God as he leads them in discovering God's will through his Word.

Some core or foundational cultural values of the Bemba

Here are some of the values that belong to the core, the foundational culture that constitute a vision of life for the African Bemba.

Religion and spirituality

The first is what we may call *religion.* This term is probably misapplied to

sub-Saharan Africans. The Bemba people do not have a word for religion in their vocabulary. There are words for 'praising God' *(ukulumbanya Lesa),* 'serving God' *(ukubombela Lesa)* and 'thanking God' *(ukutotela Lesa),* but there is no word for 'religion'. Mbiti is perhaps the first African to attempt a thorough systematization of what in my view is erroneously called 'African religions'. Mbiti himself admits this much in saying that this is not an easy task. For 'Africans are notoriously religious ... religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it' (Mbiti 1969:1). But then he proceeds to treat 'religion' as if it were a separate category from other entities in life, a category that can be systematized. This was his first mistake. For there is no body of orthodoxy preserved either orally or in literary form in the so-called African religions. The one thousand or so African ethnic groups (tribes) do not share a monolithic system of religion. Instead they have different beliefs expressed variously depending on need. This is not to say that some beliefs and practices are not more widespread, or that they do not bear any resemblance to expressions of spirituality found elsewhere in the world. Migrations, similarity in kinship systems, wars, famines, witchcraft eradication movements, intertribal trade all combined to ensure cross-fertilization of ideas and practices. In this regard Taylor is right in suggesting that 'we may reasonably claim that we are dealing with the universal, basic elements of man's understanding of God and of the world' (Taylor 1963:26). But this recognition does not amount to a promulgation of a religious system, which can be systematized around the theme, for example, of the African concept of time.

But Mbiti, along with many other Africanists, is also wrong in calling the collection of 'traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices' of African peoples a religion. The isolation of beliefs in deities and the whole spiritual side of human existence is a Cartesian creation imposed on a description of African experiences. The Enlightenment demands classification. But life for the African must be embraced in its totality. Rationalism demands that life be broken up and classified in order to be labelled and thereby presumably be understood better. Classification in itself is not a bad thing - it depends on what one does with what is so classified. In modernity, classification almost invariably leads to the process of the privileging of human minds over everything else, including the spiritual realm. Spiritual practices are therefore classified in the category of religion, which is then deemed a private pursuit that belongs to the area of personal subjective opinion. It is divorced from ordinary life in the public domain. African practice until the onset of Christianity knew no such classification.

In fact one of the major weaknesses of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, as I will seek to demonstrate in this paper, is precisely because it is a religion, 'a classroom religion' for that matter (Taylor 1963:22). It therefore fits not into the

inner person, the deep culture that is the locus of the vision of life, and where it naturally belongs, but rather, and unfortunately so, into the second set of concentric circles in our proverbial onion or the expressive culture, in the area of material and spiritual creations. It is not thus an integrating element in life. For this reason it is more accurate to speak not of African religions but African spirituality, a living faith.

Spirituality, unlike popular types of religion, does have those qualities of control and of powerful influence over life in its totality. It is an integrating principle of life. If this understanding and practice of spirituality in Africa had been transferred to the practice of Christianity, the church would be healthier, authentically African and exerting greater impact upon life in its totality, not just personal, but public as well. As it is, African spirituality controls, certainly permeates, the practice of Christianity. 'Christianity thus seemed like an ideal which people wanted to aspire to, but practically they continued living according to the normative system of their ethnic groups' (WLSA 1997:53). Van der Walt states that 'Westernisation has not touched their essential being' (van der Walt 1988:21).

Traditional Africans do not maintain a dichotomy between spiritual and secular values. 'No distinction can be made between sacred and secular, between natural and supernatural, for Nature and the Unseen are inseparably involved in one another in a total community' (Taylor 1963:72). For many Africans we understand that the material world is firmly connected to the spiritual world, and spirituality is the tie that binds human beings to the world of the ancestral spirits and gods. The practices of many African peoples show that they strongly believe in God and in the spiritual world (Mbiti 1969:16). An illness for instance is never considered, let alone treated, in isolation. Contrary to normal biomedical practice, an illness is treated as part of the person suffering within the context of the community, which includes both the people alive, and the spirits of the ancestors.

I experienced this as a child when I received treatment for the many abdominal ailments that plagued me. My maternal grandfather would always take me to a bush he knew to have medicinal qualities for dealing with abdominal disorders. He would instruct me to put my hands behind my back, to close my eyes and to walk towards the bush. Upon reaching the low-lying leaves I was to bite off a leaf at a time and chew it, swallowing the sap and spitting out the rest. While I was walking, he would walk alongside all the time saying prayers to God through the spirits of the ancestors. That is why the Bemba say, *ukwimba akati: kusanshyako na Lesa* (to dig a small stick [or perhaps more accurately a small medicinal plant], you add God). This means that to be successful at finding the right roots for medicinal application one needs more that just knowledge of the relevant

bushes. One needs the efficacious presence of God and the good will of the spirits of the ancestors in digging up the roots, or presenting sacrifices, as well as in applying the medicine (Taylor 1963:103-104). What was true of treating bodily disorders was also true of endeavours like hunting, preparing gardens for planting, going on long journeys, and deprivations like lack of food in times of drought (Taylor 1963:105).

Spiritual activities

The second core value, which derives from the first, is the growth of varieties of spiritual activities, such as rainmaking, healing, witch finding and sorcery (more widely referred to as 'witchcraft', a term Mbiti disparages and desires not to be used at all; Mbiti 1969:166). Africans are very spiritual. Unlike their Western counterparts, they have no need to be convinced of the existence of God. Many are even monotheistic. Both humanist rationalism that characterizes the West and the atheistic materialism that sums up communism are foreign to the African mind, except for a tiny group of diehard men and women who swallowed the Marxist doctrines in the Cold War era. Even they must have a tough time at funerals. I suspect that at those times they conveniently ignore their philosophies.

I recall standing at a graveside conducting a committal for an elder in a church who had died tragically in a road traffic accident. At the appointed time I invited the family and friends to follow me in throwing into the grave a token amount of soil. Many responded, including the younger brother of the deceased. In his remarks he promised the dead brother (or perhaps the spirit of the deceased) that within twelve months the person responsible for his death would similarly die. The promise was a commitment, first, to seek a diviner to discern the person responsible for the death (it is widely believed that death when it occurs is always the result of the malicious use of magic or witchcraft; death is always both natural and unnatural; Mbiti 1969:155), and, second, to use magic or witchcraft to cause the death of the person deemed to be responsible for his brother's death. Such counter-measures are common both for protection and for offensive use of magic. Many if not most African peoples believe that lots of human beings have power to tap into the supernatural realm and use such power mysteriously for harm or good. Many Christians of good standing are intimidated by threats of witchcraft. It is a fact that a number of people on death row at the Zambian maximum security prison are men who caused the death of another at a funeral. In northwestern Zambia it is believed that on the way to the grave, a spirit will take hold of the bier, bind the pall bearers and the coffin and lead them to the person who has caused the death. The power of the spirit, which at that point cannot be resisted, not only seeks out the 'culprit' who caused the death of the deceased but causes him or her to be battered to death by using the coffin as a battering ram!

In spite of these horror stories arising from African openness to the spirit world, it

is precisely this openness to spiritual things that has made it easier to account for, and is in part responsible for, the phenomenal growth of the church in the developing world. The important question is, which spirit is one in tune with?

Commitment to the group

The third value is commitment to the group. One of the hallmarks of Western Christianity from the time of the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution is the concept of 'faith as a matter of individual decision and individual application' (Walls 1996:21). This is what John Taylor calls the 'isolated man with his intensely private world' (Taylor 1963:93). On the contrary, for the African person such isolationism is unimaginable. Taylor is so captivated by the all-embracing presence of the group that his chapter on an African anthropology, entitled 'What is Man?', is simply a description of an African person's incorporation into and existence within the extended family. He says:

> The sense of the personal totality of all being, and of a humanity which embraces the living, the dead and the divinities, fills the background of the primal world-view. But the foreground in which this solidarity becomes sharply defined and directly experienced is the life of the extended family, the clan, and the tribe. This is the context in which an African learns to say I am because I participate. To him the individual is an abstraction; Man is a family. (Taylor 1963:93)

My nuclear family, that is the immediate family to which I belong as a son, at the moment comprises sixty-eight people (three have died: my father, one niece and a nephew). There are four generations included: my mother (parent), twelve of us (children) plus all our spouses, all our children (grandchildren), and three great-grandchildren. My extended family comprises the nuclear families of my parents' siblings. That number is in excess of two hundred people. But that is not all, for all my father's and mother's collateral relations and their families are also members of my extended family. If we were to count them all, there would be no fewer than five hundred. This is what is called in Bemba *ulupwa* - one's paternal and maternal relatives (WLSA 1997:9).

Legally defined, a family is 'a socially recognised union of two people and any offspring from that union' (WLSA 1997:30). This is what the Bemba would call 'those of one house'; that is to say, they have one mother and one father. Culturally and practically this is the least significant of the definitions of 'family'. It corresponds to a household, although even a household would normally be greater in that it includes all the people who live together and share the same dwellings, food and other basic essentials. *Ulupwa,* among the Bemba, corresponds more to the kinship group and that really only to the maternal relatives. This is espe-

cially so because the Bemba are matrilineal. But in practice bilateralism is common. Two proverbs illustrate this: (i) *abana ba mjubu: bangala amatenga yonse* (children of a hippo play in all the pools of water in the river or lake, which means that children belong to both their paternal and maternal kin); (2) *umutembo: ufinina konse* (a heavy burden weighs heavily on both sides, which means the duty and cost of bringing up children must be shared equally between the two sides of the family. Both sides of the family should recognize their obligations to the child as a member of the two families).

The extended family combines all the benefits of a fully-fledged social security system without any bewildering red tape. 'The family is a refuge in both the urban and rural areas, and the only institution providing some form of social security' (WLSA 1997:190). Children needing school fees appeal to the family members who will invariably oblige. Children needing to be housed for any number of reasons will find a home in the house of a member of the family. Elderly people, parents or uncles and aunts, who need to be looked after will not normally be shunted off to an old people's home but will be cared for by their own children at home. The system is flexible, efficient and user friendly.

The sense of solidarity of the family is a felt thing. Nowhere is this more real than at a family funeral when hordes of relatives gather for several days to mourn and bury the departed. The physical presence of all relatives is imperative. Sometimes the necessity arises from fear that absence could be interpreted as evidence of guilt for having been the source of witchcraft that led to the death of the departed. But in general it is the duty of relatives to attend all funerals. At the funeral house itself, the sheer numbers of relatives makes the burden of grief light. Physical duties like baby care, cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry are all done by the many gathered willing helpers. Babies become the focus of particular attention as they are introduced and passed around to the relatives they have never seen. The prosperous members of the family will make contributions to pay for the gathering and the funeral expenses related to the actual burial. The camaraderie is also very significant. Lots of family stories are told and family histories may be recited for the benefit of the young. Identity crisis is not really a problem on the African continent, although it may be so among the African Diaspora in the impersonal cities of Europe, America and elsewhere.

There are difficulties with the extended family system, however. Some unscrupulous people can easily abuse it. Lazy people can opt out of their obligations and instead move from one relative's house to another in search of a more comfortable life. But abuses do not outweigh the benefits of the system. There are, however, some important issues in relation to the church. These include the matter of fellowship, support for the church, hospitality, individuality (personal and in

relation to any given marriage) and priority of relatives. Let me deal with just two of these: fellowship and priority of relatives.

Christian fellowship and the African extended family system

Fellowship is an essential part of what it means to be a Christian. The apostle John considers it to be the grounds for the incarnation (1 John 1:3-7): Jesus came into the world that he might create the basis for fellowship. The word 'fellowship', from the Greek *koinonia,* is used in the New Testament to describe the church in terms of community, participation and, of course, fellowship. At the basis of the use of this word group is the idea of a common and shared background. In the Christian sense this stems from our 'being united in Christ. . . participation in the Spirit' (Philippians 2:1). The Christian heritage includes primarily a participation in the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. These things cannot be changed because they are bestowed on us by God.

I have a brother who has lived for the past quarter of a century in North America. He now speaks with an accent reflecting his chosen country of domicile and his complexion is quite different from mine. We rarely correspond as brothers should. But there is nothing that either my brother or I could do to take away the fact that we will remain, in name anyway, brothers to our dying day. The sooner we start behaving as brothers in reality the better for both of us. Similarly, Christian fellowship is not just what we share in common; it must issue in community of goods (Acts 2:43-47) and the giving and receiving of hospitality (Acts 9:43). These attributes find much common ground with the African extended family.

All who belong to any extended family share a common biological ancestry. Their blood, their names and to a large extent their culture can all be traced back to a common ancestor or set of ancestors. The extended family gives us identity and a strong sense of family or clan solidarity. The relationships between members result not only in words of affirmation but especially in deeds of solidarity that include many of the attributes of a fully functioning social security system in the West. But more than that there is a strong personal social support structure to meet the needs of the members at all times.

One would have assumed that the similarities in attributes between the African extended family and the Body of Christ, the church, would make it easier for the African church to live out the concept of fellowship more fully. But sadly the reality in many places is that the experience of 'fellowship' in the natural family is so real and exclusive that it hinders and discourages fellowship in the church. The sense of solidarity stemming from common ancestry is so strong that it acts as a big barrier to the idea of extending the same sense of community to total strangers. Tribal churches thrive on this weakness.

Priority of relatives is the term I choose to use to describe the fact that in life, personal, social, public, relatives always assume a place of priority over all others. In public life nepotism is a blight on the political and social landscape of the African continent. Priority of relatives distorts a proper sense of justice and fair play. But it is also and maybe especially so in marriage where priority of relatives can have a devastating effect on personal relations and on the ability of culture to negate the teaching of Scripture. The Bemba always say, *umwanakashi: mwinafyalo,* 'a woman [wife] is always a foreigner'. That means she must never be allowed to assume a place of importance in relation to her husband prior to his relatives. The woman on the other hand will never allow her sisters in law to assume a place of prominence prior to her in relation to her brothers. The unfortunate result in many cases is that marriages can be little more than convenient arrangements for increasing the number of people in the extended family and may thus lack the rich mix of love, care and sharing the Bible envisages. One of the more unfortunate demonstrations of this fact is the prevalence in both Zambia and Zimbabwe of what is called the dispossession of widows. In the event of the husband dying before the wife, his relatives move in and strip the house of all assets and distribute them among themselves, leaving the widow and her children destitute. 'There are many people who take the cattle or the money paid for the daughters of their deceased brothers, but do not provide the sons of their brothers with wives' (Van Rooy 1978:19). In an atmosphere like this, biblical teaching on subjects like marriage often falls on stone-deaf ears. One Christian with whom I discussed these issues said to me that one needs to live in exile, away from one's relatives and cultural milieu, in order to have any chance of being true to the teaching of the Bible in these matters. He at least recognized the challenge but indicated that attempts to be successful were doomed to fail!

Ukulilapo

The fourth core value is what I call *ukulilapo.* This is a Bemba word derived from the word *ukulya* (to eat). The word implies that in every situation it is my duty to exploit the circumstances to my personal (and by extension my extended family's) advantage. The attitude may well have arisen at a time when eating was the preoccupation of most people and feasting was to be desired, for it was so rare. However it came about, it is a fact that this attitude, and nepotism as an expression of it, makes public and social accountability very difficult indeed. New orphanages are a case in point. Many of these institutions have sprung up in response to the great numbers of orphans from the scourge of the AIDS pandemic. The suffering of children attracts a lot of sympathy from donors all over the world. And yet it is common to see the children for whom such aid is sought and procured still languishing on scraps while the person running the orphanage grows wealthier and so do his or her relatives. Such abuse of public trust would not be understood for what it really is, stealing,

but as a duty that one has to himself and his or her relatives. Dare I suggest it that some of the resources of many local churches and denominations are misused in this way?

Life after death

The fifth core value is belief in the *afterlife.* Ecclesiastes says that God has put eternity in the heart of people (3:11). Whatever else this verse means, it certainly suggests that it is part of the human condition not only to long for but to seek for life after life.

In Africa there are two clear lines of thought in considering what happens to a person after death. The first is the translation of the dead into the *living dead.* These are the spirits of the departed who are nevertheless very much alive and well and resident in the neighbourhood either in a physical reality like a tree or simply as a disembodied spirit. As pointed out earlier, the living dead are still part of the family. Care must be taken not to ignore or be negligent to them. Libations and foods must be left for them. In times of crises they can be consulted and appealed to for protection. Although they are invisible, they are very much alive and part of the family. Eventually they will pass on when their memory is completely erased from human consciousness after the demise of the last remaining relative who remembers them in physical form. From then on they become part of the corporate identity of the spirits of our fathers.

The second line of thought in dealing with the afterlife has to do with *inheritance.* After the death of a man or woman, the relatives gather to appoint the person who will inherit the deceased. It is important to establish that inheritance in this case has little to do with receiving bequests, and everything to do with 'becoming' in a mysterious way the person who has died. Symbolically the family through the ceremony invites back the departed and renews contact with him or her (Mbiti 1969:152). At the appointed time a younger relative will be nominated. Sometimes the deceased might have nominated the person he desired. In matrilineal ethnic groups the line of inheritance goes through a man's sisters and their children, his uterine nephews and nieces (Richards 1950:222). This is perhaps what makes the sisters of a man so special and important. They bear him the boys who will take his name after his death.

The ritual is chaired by a leading member of the family and all involved are asked to sit in the circle and the nominee is asked to sit in the middle of the circle. The subject is then given water to drink and token chattels from the wardrobe of the deceased. He or she may also be given some implements that defined the major activity of the deceased. For example, he may be given a gun if the deceased had been a hunter, a hoe for a farmer and so on. Then words are uttered inviting back the

deceased to take up residence in the body of the nominee. Notice that people inherit people, not wealth.

From that moment on the candidate in effect becomes the departed. All who had relationships with the departed transfer those to the candidate so that they relate to him or her in the same way they would have related to the departed. A man whose daughter has inherited his grandmother will always treat her with the same love and respect as he would his departed forebear. This person will henceforth be the representative of the departed among the living. The living/dead are immanent and involved among their people in this way. As the ritual of inheritance unfolds, comments are invited from everyone who wishes to speak. The speakers address the nominee in words that make it clear that they are addressing the departed. The nominee has effectively *become* the dead person. The children of the departed will regard the nominee in effect, and defer to him, as if he were their real father. Boys inherit their maternal uncles and girls their maternal aunts.

A friend once introduced me to his nine-year-old daughter with the words 'This is my older sister.' As long as the young woman is alive, and there are people who remember that she has taken the name of the departed, to all intents and purposes she is the reality of the afterlife of the person whose name she now bears. This is why it is so important to have children. A childless person is an oddity and in the case of death peculiar rituals will be done to ensure that his spirit is not inherited. A childless marriage is no use to anyone and the relatives will exert pressure to dissolve the marriage. All these expectations make for difficult teaching in areas of fidelity and faithfulness in marriage.

We can also speak of a third way of conceiving of the afterlife, which involves the naming of children. Names of the newborn are sometimes discerned through dreams and visions or divination. Such names will invariably belong to some ancestor whose spirit is seen to want to continue its existence in the material world through a newborn child.

These then are the three ways of conceiving of the afterlife, primarily in terms of the living dead or through inheritance but also by the giving of ancestral names to newborn children. Such an afterlife is bound firmly to this present earth, and existence in the afterlife is conceived of in terms of an earthly body. We might call this 'existence by proxy'. In more general terms we see the afterlife in a corporate disembodied spiritual existence as the living dead, a hope very different from the Christian hope.

The glory of the Christian message is seen not only in the resurrection of the new incorruptible body, but also in existence in the very presence of God eternally, without

any fear of death (1 Corinthians 15:51-57). The preachers in the churches must take these values and look at them in the light of Scripture in order to be relevant to the African constituencies they serve. The repeating of evangelical platitudes originally conceived in other cultures will thus not serve the African church.

African concept of time

The sixth core value is the African *concept of time.* According to Mbiti (1969:17), African time has two basic dimensions, the present and the past. The future is really only important in that it will become the present and later on the past. Time moves 'backwards rather than forward'. Time does not exist in a vacuum as something with independent value. Human beings create time to be used as and when it is needed. We are masters of time, not slaves to it (except in the limited sense of having to act quickly in the case of an emergency). African calendars, if they do exist, are phenomenological, filled with events and people, not a linear succession of measures of time leading to the future. It is the events and the people who define time.

The names of the months are instructive in this regard. In Bemba the names of the months correspond either to the dominant distinguishing human activity during that period or to the most prominent natural phenomenon during that lunar cycle. So November *(Mupundu milimo)* is not only the month when the mupundu fruit ripens but is also the busiest month in terms of preparing the fields for planting. June, one of the coldest months, is called *Cikungulu pepo* (the greater cold).

The Bible views time as something God created (Genesis 1:3 -2:2). It belongs to him and through time he expresses his purposes and will. Time is not just the Greek idea *chronos* (a linear succession of events); it is also *kairos* (the appointed time), especially God's appointed time. God controls, interprets and terminates time (Nyirongo 1997:94). The African view emphasizes our mastery and control of time, while Westerners view time as an independent commodity by which we are controlled. Both need to understand that without God our understanding of time lacks an important dimension. We are accountable to God in our use of time.

The good image syndrome

The seventh core value is *social definitions of truth,* what I called above the *good image syndrome.*[3] Western philosophy since the Enlightenment has generally conceptualized truth in absolute terms but divorced from any metaphysical ideas or notions. This conception of truth has drawn a sharp distinction between facts and values. Facts are objectively true, while values are a matter for personal opinion. Bosch summarizes the debate in the following words:

> Over against facts there are values, based not on knowledge but on opinion, on belief. Facts cannot be disputed; values on the other hand are a matter of preference and choice. Religion was assigned to this realm of values since it rested on subjective notions and could not be proved correct. It was relegated to the private world of opinion and divorced from the public world of facts (Bosch 1993:266).

Science assumes enormous prestige in this privileging of its form of knowledge over biblical revelation. Scientific truth has its basis in observation but observation has its limitations. A chicken observing the farmer putting down food in its feeding trough assumes, on the basis of observation, that the farmer puts down the food in order to feed it. This is true but it is not the whole truth. The chicken has no way of knowing the financial and economic strategies behind the farmer's actions! But in general it is observation that gives the Western concept of truth the quality of timelessness or contextual autonomy. As a consequence Western culture has basically rejected the metaphysical world as true because such notions and concepts are not verifiable. Their 'truth' must be virtual rather than absolute. In line with this, a statement is deemed to be true if there is a verifiable corresponding fact or reality behind it. It is fake if no such corresponding fact or reality exists. This conceptualization of truth puts Western attitudes in sharp contrast to those of other cultures like that of the Bemba.

For most if not all African cultures, 'Criteria of truth and value are socially, not internally, generated and applied; · responsibility is communal, not conscientious, and public shame, not guilty self, is the penalty for moral contravention' (Maxwell 1983:24). When the need to tell the 'truth' conflicts with a greater value (i.e. the demand to protect one's 'good image' or defend a close relative) it is appropriate to tell lies. However, although everyone acknowledges the lies as lies, the person who told them to protect his kin or his 'good image' will generally be upheld in the community as truthful. This often brings much biblical teaching into conflict with culture.

Conclusion

We could add to this list still more significant core values such as concepts of seniority and authority, guilt and shame, and so on. All these values are to be found in the spiritual core of one's life, the deep or foundational culture, and they form the integrating principle of life. They fundamentally affect how we view the world and how we understand ourselves, our human nature, the human condition. They also affect how we perceive and practise Christianity for better or for worse.

Around such a core of values any culture builds its essential expressive or surface institutions such as marriage and family, work, play, relationships, methods of healing, even the church; these are the human creations that appear as

the culture of any given people. The question is, how does the core affect the institutions any cultural group sets up? For the African situation, because the core of values, which are spiritual in orientation, are in effect an integrating principle of life, and because there is no secular-sacred divide in public and private conception of life, the core values affect every one of the essential cultural institutions.

So, with respect to understanding human realities, as seen above, treatment of any illness is both a physical and a spiritual exercise. Unlike medical science, African systems of healing treat illnesses in a social context in which the spiritual element plays an integral part. Similarly priority of relatives encourages nepotism in public office and at the same time makes it difficult for marriages to attain the ideal spelt out in Genesis 2:24-25, where a man and woman must leave their respective parents, physically mentally, emotionally and spiritually in order to be united in an indissoluble union. The desire for children often means a person's worth is judged by his or her ability to bear children, so childless men and women are the object of great community derision. Childless couples come under intolerable pressure to break up.

What then is the effect of these core values on the institutions of the church? Ideally at conversion one would hope that it is the core values that are 'converted' and replaced by biblical values, derived from the Bible and enshrined in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Because the core values are already both spiritual in orientation and an integrating principle in life, it is often stated that therefore when an African gets converted the core values are somehow transformed to reflect new allegiances and immediately, following established patterns, become the new integrating principle of life in its totality. The unavoidable inference is that the African church should therefore reflect biblical values through and through.

This is obviously too simplistic a formula. Processes of conversion are truly complex and when they occur they do so for a variety of reasons quite apart from the straightforward desire to follow another religion. Aguilar says, 'African processes of conversion are fluid, and they also include processes of reconversion to religious practices socially present in the eras preceding the world religions' (Aguilar 1995:526). Fear, opportunities for commercial and political advancement, desire to create cohesion around a tribal identity, economic survival, all can play significant parts in the decision made especially by groups of people to convert from traditional beliefs to a world religion. Since core values change very slowly at the presuppositional philosophical level (Jacobs 1979:181), it takes a long time before 'true' religion of the heart corresponds with what takes place at the expressive or surface level culture. In the intervening period we can expect to see a kind of localization of the new religion as expressive cultural forms superficially change to correspond to the new-found faith.

This is the case in much of Africa, where Christianity appears as a veneer

thoroughly affected by the original African core values. 'The Christian spiritual import, with its aim at bringing men to their ultimate goal in heaven may be a mere overcoat over traditional deep seated beliefs and customs leaving them undisturbed' (Oger 1991:231). This I believe is the reason why so often the church in Africa has been compared to a river two miles wide but a mere two inches deep! This is an admission of the failure of African Christianity to root into the foundational or deep cultural level of the host cultures on the African continent. Instead it has adopted surface cultural changes, such as singing Christian hymns (for a long time these could only be Christian if they were in the traditional Western linguistic forms and idiom), meeting on Sundays, reading the Bible, adopting 'Christian' names, forms of dress, taking communion, undergoing baptism and so on.

I am suggesting that it is only by such attempts to take more fully into account African traditional perspectives on the human condition that Christianity in Africa will be able to live out a truly effective and enriching demonstration of biblical values within our African setting.

End Notes

[1] Joe M Kapolyo, *The Human Condition: Christian Perspectives through African Eyes* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 2005) 34-45.

[2] A book entitled *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana,* written by G. M. Setiloane (Rotterdam: Balkema, 1976), is an ethnological study of the Sotho/Tswana-speaking people of Botswana with a view to encouraging the judicial acceptance of the cultures so described as fit vessels for the communication of the gospel.

[3] This material is based on a discussion in an MA dissertation I submitted to the University of London for the degree of MA in Social Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1996. A fuller discussion exists there but here I summarize the essentials.

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