



## THEOLOGY OF CULTURE FOR MODERN AFRICA

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### Abstract

This paper will seek to formulate a distinct theology of culture for the modern African context, and one that will respond appropriately to the unique and varied needs of the modern African person. This paper utilises Prof. William Dryness' description of the culture, which offers a finer definition of the term. The role and place of culture in theological discourses has been a subject of intense controversy among theologians and scholars over the years. This controversy has been fueled by the perceived exclusion of culture as a key player in shaping our theological enterprise and especially in the African context. The foregoing notwithstanding, theology in its nature is contextual. This assertion flows from both the biblical and historical models of theologising. It is notable therefore that, culture plays a vital role in the theological enterprise of a given people in a given place. There is a need to open our spectrum of learning about God in the African context. If we stick only to the conventional theological approach and notions that were in many ways not inclusive, we may lose an opportunity to learn and discover God. This is why a theology of Culture is important because it adds a new arena or platform upon which God's revelatory possibility is evident.

**Key terms:** Cultural wisdom, cultural scripts, songs and proverbs.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Historically, the theological enterprise has taken either the abstract or the exclusion path in its endeavour. In some cases, it has taken both paths. It takes an abstract path if it has not taken certain contextual dynamics and concerns seriously. Exclusion in that it has not considered an all-encompassing approach in relation to the issue of humanity and society that shape how people understand and articulate as well as practice their Christian faith. Although there have been, and indeed there are inevitable theological conversations taking place in various contexts, it has been on a selective basis. This is to say that dialogue or conversation has been within selected categories and quarters of human existence depending on whether the aspect is deemed worthy of discussion. Such an attempt has led to leaving out some key contributors or voices to the task of constructing a relevant and transformative theology. If theology has to inform, influence and transform day-to-day human lives, it must embrace an inclusive and holistic approach.

For a long time, the theological enterprise has operated based on pre-determined '*proclaimed conventional sources*'. It is not until recent times that attempts to move beyond the perceived 'fixed sources' of doing theology became evident. This is what steered the culture talk to the theological conversation platform. Katongole observes that "excluding culture from the theological dialogue is excluding a key vehicle of God's revelatory possibility" (Katongole, 2011). This paper will therefore develop a theology of culture (in the context of Africa) in conversation with Bediako (Christianity in Africa) and Katongole (The Sacrifice of Africa), among other key voices on the subject.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture is not static but rather dynamic. The definition points to the fact that culture cannot be generalised but is specific to a specific context. In summary, the term culture, even though used in a wide range, will be used for this paper to refer hanging set of specific communal practices and assumptions that serve as a catalogue for specific people's actions. Dyrness defines culture as "that changing set of communal practices and assumptions that serve as the repertoire of a people's actions and by which they express their identity" (Dyrness, 1995, 63). Theology of culture requires not just an open mind but a different mindset. This is because the subject of culture has been a contentious one in theological circles throughout Christian history. This is probably due to the underlying notions that have informed theologians regarding the subject of culture. Most of what has been known about the culture, especially when it comes to the African context, was packaged from the West. This was and has been characterised by labelling, categorising as well as belittling some cultures and cultural aspects over and above others. There are some 'superior' 'holy' or 'good' cultures and vice versa. As Galgalo, in his recent book, '*African Christianity: The stranger within*' observes regarding missionary evangelistic efforts in Africa, "It involved the uncritical assumption that the African person religiously speaking is 'an empty vessel' ready to be filled with Christian content" (Galgalo, 2012, p. 14). It is sensible to suspect that the 'empty vessel mentality' cuts across not only matters related to religion but also the question of culture. Suspicion and judgment became the new premise upon which looked at culture. Can culture, viewed through such suspicious lenses, be useful to the theological enterprise? How many cultures can we consider in our endeavour to do theology? Are there any helpful aspects of culture in doing theology? Or is culture too evil that God

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cannot reveal Himself through its facets? Such concerns became the genesis of the divergent attitudes and perceptions that several theologians have propagated regarding culture.

A mind-set anchored on the premise of exclusion and cultural superiority can only produce a partial theology. A theology is devoid of a holistic consideration of the possible and available sources of discovering God. Johnstone, in his article, *'God's wider Revelation: Reconsidering General Revelation'*, points us to an alternative mind-set when he says, "We believe God is active in the world. We recognise God's indefinable presence in music, film, art and other key areas of contemporary culture" (Johnstone, 2014, p. 25). Johnstone is hereby advocating for a mind-set that holds to the omnipresent nature of God in its full connotation. Omnipresence here is to be taken in its full and inclusive tenets. And indeed, there cannot be anything like partial omnipresence when it comes to God. The omnipresent God is active in every detail and aspect of the world. It is not for us humans to direct God into which details or aspects of creation He can be present and which ones He should not be present. We should keep Isaiah 55: 8 and Jeremiah 23: 24b in mind. It is impossible to have parts or aspects of creation devoid of his divine presence if God fills the heaven and earth.

In attempting to show that a positivist mind-set of culture is important, Dyrness stated, "No culture is so distorted and broken that the gospel cannot be expressed and lived out in its terms". Theology of culture needs to be anchored on such a positivistic view of culture. Traces of God will be found in varying aspects and dynamics of any human culture on the planet earth. We require a positive mind-set regarding culture to discern these traces of divine presence and revelation.

This issue probably explains Bediako's concern upon the mention by both Andrew Walls and David Barret of the new role of Christianity in African life. Bediako notes, "There is evidence of torn fabric of African Identity hence incomplete and fettered African human and personality" (Bediako, 1995, p.5). For Bediako, a wrong mindset has given birth to a plagiarised identity. Bediako is wondering how the above prediction will be actualised in a setting marred by an identity crisis. For Bediako, a well-defined identity that is not imposed on a people is mandatory for the future of theology. Such an identity crisis is potentially responsible for a negative mind-set on culture. A Christianity that thrives on destroying cultural fabrics will produce a weak and incomplete theology.

Katongole (2011), on his side, sees this problem of a wrong mind-set on culture and other related aspects, especially among Africans, as rooted in what he calls 'a wrong formative narrative'. Katongole recommends, "A different story from the existing formative story is needed, one that assumes the sacred value and dignity of Africa and Africans". In other words, Katongole and Bediako agree that Africa and Africans are unequipped for the theological task. For Africans to undertake a constructive and transformative theological endeavour, a different mindset must first be established. This same argument applies to a theology of culture.

Traditionally, the talk of God's revelation has been the reserve of academia. Thus, academia, the custodians of theological enterprise, has ended up doing the prescriptive role of what God's revelation should entail

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and setting the parameters upon which it should be viewed. Generally, they closed the chapter of any new possibilities of God's revelatory avenues in the minds of many. This, in a way, rendered lay people (Christians) and those with little education to be disinterested in taking any key interest in revelatory possibilities around their vicinity or within their day-to-day contexts. In a way, the revelation consciousness in us has since been suppressed. However, Johnstone (2014) observes, "There is a growing discontent in how the church has traditionally talked about God's self-revelation outside the church." Such discontent has become the genesis of new openings and insights into new revelatory possibilities. Johnstone's suggestion of 'wearing a new set of spectacles' in looking at God's revelation is inviting theologians to a new task. It is time that theologians consider wearing the spectacles of modern culture to see if they offer any possibilities of God's revelatory avenues or pointers.

Theology of culture will be doomed if it does not start with the inevitable premise of God's wider revelation, a truth anchored in God's inspired Word. That God has been and is constantly revealing Himself to humanity in a variety of ways and through many avenues. Paul captures this reality in his epistle to the Romans when he says, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been seen clearly, being understood from what is made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1: 20). Revelation can neither be a one-time event or a closed-up episode nor for the privileged class. According to this scripture, God is constantly making Himself known through inexhaustible and unlimited avenues. Ripken (2014) states that 'God always takes the initiative. He is always seeking ways to reveal Himself in the darkest corners of the earth.' In its nature, revelation is an ongoing process. However dynamic and divergent, culture should be included in this unlimited avenue of God's revelatory possibilities. Yet, just like the older culture, modern culture has suffered from serious condemnation and has continued to be treated with suspicion in various theological conversations.

Bediako sees this new revelatory possibility as having been shuttered in the course of Western values for Christianity, especially in the African context. In talking about the Western value setting for Christianity, Bediako notes that "It was having a distorting effect on indigenous developments in Christian thought" (Bediako, 1995, p. 110). This Western value setting of Christianity meant that certain things were set and determined, such as doctrinal positions and theological methodologies. African theologians were left with no option but to start from the 'already'. Their hands were tied. This resulted in propagating an already restricted and closed theology. Theology of culture in the modern African setting has to begin with untying the African theologians' already tied hands in terms of 'alternative perceptual possibilities'. This can be done by utilising the 'immanent frame approach' (Dyrness, 2015).

In culture lies a potential wealth of revelatory possibilities. Johnstone (2014) concludes, "It is not sufficient to close the chapter on new revelatory possibilities. It is important to glimpse new possibilities from scripture, Church traditions and life in seeking to construct a relevant theology." This is the attitude that we need to have as we develop a theology of culture. He further makes it clear, "The witness of our culture cannot be ignored in seeking to understand God." Ripken (2014) echoes this when he says, "It turns out that there is no place where God is not working. In every place, God is already calling people to Himself." (Ripken, 2014, p. 139).

## 3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

God has made the possibility for people to know Him. He has put in place unlimited pointers of His divine presence in the entire universe. The psalmist captures this truth in Psalm 19: 2 – 3, saying, “There is no language or speech where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out worldwide, their words to the ends of the universe.” However, many are times that we fail to discern God’s presence and manifestations even when it seems obvious. As a result, we miss out on God in our day-to-day settings. Several explanations can be attributed to such a failure to discern God’s revelatory moments. Among them is the preoccupation with Scripture and Jesus Christ as the sole God’s revelatory possibility leading us to take for granted creation and cultural avenues that are readily available to us. This should not be considered to mean an attempt to undermine the centrality of scripture and Jesus Christ in knowing God. Rather, it is a calling to carefully and constructively look beyond these two sources of God’s revelation to enrich our view of God’s self-disclosure. As earlier described, culture involves changing communal practices and assumptions. The concern at this point is with the cultural practices.

### Cultural Wisdom

One of the key cultural premises within the African context that is instrumental for our theological endeavour is cultural wisdom. This is evident in what is called ‘reflexive ability’. It entails the ability to imagine and work towards a future that does not exist. In so doing, it reflects the way creation is intended to work. However, this is not as evident as it sounds, especially in the African context. Hence, concerns are raised regarding how to operationalise the reflexive ability within the African setting. This is because a great deal of distortion in terms of imagination happened in the name of the slave trade, colonialism and missionary enterprise, among others. Jennings (2010) opined on the degree of various distortions that occurred during the stated historical occurrences and the processes therein as well as their implications for the Christian life and practice. For instance, Jennings reflecting on the issue of distortion, notes, ‘The deepest theological distortion taking place is that the earth, the ground, spaces and places are being removed as living organisers of identity and as facilitators of identity.’ Jennings’ argument can be stretched further to show that it is not only that identity markers were destroyed but that potential platforms for displaying cultural wisdom were, in turn, destroyed. This gets closer to Bediako’s concern over the identity crisis confronting Africa and Africans at large.

Bediako (1995) has argued that ‘The issue of identity lies at the heart of the process by which the Christian theological enterprise is actually carried forward’ (Bediako, 1995, p. 256). Bediako says identity concerns lay at the base of all attempts of theological enterprise in Africa. Bediako develops this identity problem argument by interacting with some leading voices in the African theological scholarship, such as Idowu, Mbiti and Sanneh, among others.

Katongole (2011) gives hope when he proposes that Africa needs to go back to the story of ‘in the beginning’. In other words, he is advocating for a re-telling of the African story. For him, hope is not gone. But a different story is needed to ignite hope. Katongole says, ‘the commitment is first and foremost about a return and rediscovery of the story of God’s creation, and to stand within that story to receive the fresh

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gifts of visions and dreams of a new future: Africa.' From this standpoint of the story of 'in the beginning', we begin to appreciate our cultural setting and premises.

To discover the cultural wisdom available in each setting, one must go to the people and use the tool of ethnography. In other words, cultural wisdom is not discovered in literature or seminary forums but using an ethnographic approach. Dyrness said, 'Ethnographic research becomes important because to understand a culture, we need a new way of looking at it and find out why people do certain things in a particular way'. Cultural wisdom can be discovered through listening, observing and participating with the people in their informal and formal settings. Bediako summarises this issue of cultural wisdom very well when he says, 'Can a system of life by which a race has lived through many centuries be entirely worthless? Must it not contain elements of divine education and guidance that should not be destroyed but be brought to full evolution? May it not be preparatory stage of fuller life?' (Bediako, 1995, p. 202). This is where observing, listening and participating with the people is instrumental for discovering a lot of wisdom that is not documented or taught but is obvious in the day-to-day operations of the people. A wealth of revelation possibilities is embedded within our culture yet to be discovered and utilised. This explains why a theology of culture is an important arm of the theological enterprise.

## Cultural Scripts

While it is true that Africa has and continues to grapple with non-writing culture for decades, it is to be understood that this did not and does not mean a complete absence of African cultural scripts. On the contrary, the African context is endowed with a wealth of scripts full of important divine revelatory hints and possibilities. These scripts may not be found in Academic libraries or institutions. However, they are readily available in varying forms within our day-to-day contexts. Katongole warns that, as Africans, we should avoid 'framing our lives within *telos* of nothing good here' (Katongole, 2011). There is a need to look deeper than what is or what has been superficially seen as written scripts.

Scripture invites us to non-written scripts for lessons in our Christian living. God has deposited important guides for effective Christian living in our cultural symbols and activities. For instance, Proverbs 6: 6 – 11 is an invitation to go to the ants, observe and learn from them. The ants and their activity become a lived script. Further, in the Old Testament, we read of Prophet Jeremiah being invited by God to a cultural activity of his time in Jeremiah 18: 1 – 4. Jeremiah was to observe and learn from a cultural activity of pottery. The most important thing was that Jeremiah would learn about God and his activity. In other words, this cultural activity had a divine revelatory possibility. The cultural activity acted as a script upon which Jeremiah was to read and learn about God. There was within this cultural activity a revelatory possibility. Unfortunately, we seem to have a theological formation that has led us to overlook cultural activities and symbols as important scripts that God can use to point us to himself. Who could be responsible for such oversight? How can we regain this insight? This remains a task that African theologians have got to address.

## Songs and Proverbs

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Mbiti (1969) underscores the centrality of African proverbs in theology when he says, 'It is in proverbs that we find the remains of the oldest forms of African religious and philosophical wisdom' (Mbiti, 1969, 67). He further adds that 'Proverbs are common ways of expressing religious ideas and feelings'. Despite the impact of modernisation and other recent forces upon Africa, it is factual that proverbs are still strong and commonly used in the most African setting. In this case, as Mbiti alludes, it is necessary that theologians take this avenue of God's revelatory possibility seriously. In the same breath, songs express people's belief in God. Within many African songs are traces of certain attributes of God. Mbiti is right when he talks about religious songs and observes that 'this is another rich area where one expects to find repositories of traditional beliefs, ideas, wisdom, and feelings'. A theologian of culture will need to listen, analyse and discern some of the echoes of the various views on God from African religious songs. Though some of the constructions may not be theologically accurate or correct, there is a need to discern the theological echoes therein patiently.

For instance, Tanzanian gospel songs, especially those sung by the Church choirs of different denominations, have been locally composed in Kiswahili. Suppose anyone wants to discover, for instance, the Tanzanian Christian theology of spirits, demons and evil forces and their activities. In that case, most of their contemporary gospel and indigenous songs tell it all. This trend is increasingly becoming the same for Kenyan gospel music, especially those sung by the church choirs. So while I concur with Mbiti that 'African people are very fond of singing', there is a need to listen and discern carefully the theology expressed therein.

A lot of what is called 'secular music' within the African setting is equally full of revelatory possibilities, especially when non-Christian composers or singers express their appreciation and views regarding God, humanity and so forth. What is required is the need to shelve our quick judgmental attitude to allow us to listen and discern. Traditionally, a lot of lessons for life, guidance and counselling were done in the form of songs. Other approaches comprised of proverbs and storytelling. All these acted as forms of communication loaded with divine truths. It will be necessary for African theologians to consider this resource in their theological deliberations.

## Poetic Practices

Poetic practices have to do with things people love doing to enjoy and fill in gaps in their day-to-day activities. This is one area that African theologians have not taken serious cognisance of, and hence very little writing on the same. But the fact that theologians have not taken cognisance of it does not mean that African people do not practice these poetics. These day-to-day poetics are not activities in a curriculum form but rather spontaneous. People just come up with them repeatedly and keep doing them as long as they bring some form of fulfilment and enjoyment. They include many kinds of symbolic objects and practices. Dryness (2010) observes that 'these are objects that embody the desires and dreams around which people orient their lives!

Africans, whether old or young, are full of poetic practices depending on the context. However, there has never been any serious move towards discerning the presence of God in these practices. This could be due

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to the prevailing theological notions that do not see poetics as a potential arena for learning about God. As we raise questions regarding why people are drawn into these practices, we are likely to engage in a theological conversation. The issue of the creativity of the people coming up with unique activities that have not been there before and that gives them enjoyment is in itself a key indicator of Divine influence working behind the activities.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

**Conclusion:** God is constantly at work in all generations. This is evident in the varying arenas. Culture is one of this inevitable arena. Dryness (2010) rightly says, 'Culture is the sphere in which God is at work'. If we stick only to the conventional theological approach and notions that were in many ways not inclusive, we may lose an opportunity to learn and discover God. This is why a theology of Culture is important because it adds a new arena or platform upon which God's revelatory possibility is evident.

**Recommendation:** The study recommends that theologians of different contexts need to embark on a serious theological conversation with culture. A thorough cultural exegesis is required for the purpose of doing a sound biblical theology of culture. In addition, we need to open our spectrum of learning about God in an African context.

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