



## **CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN CULTURE – FRIENDS OR FOES?**

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I want to examine the interface between African culture, especially its Zambian expression, as it relates to the practical way we think about our Christian lives and more particularly the kind of choices such thinking leads to. Can an African be truly African, culturally speaking, and yet be truly Christian? Or, to put it the other way around, can an African person be truly Christian and yet be recognisably African. Can African culture and Christianity ever meet as friends? Must those of us who strive to be true to our ‘Christian heritage’ be reconciled to the charge of betraying our African-ness?

### **What is Culture?**

I think of culture simply as the collective way a people group or community responds to the multiple challenges of living. One will find a number of different proposals as to how culture may be defined. One example of a definition by two Christian authors from almost 30 years ago says: “We may define culture as learned and shared attitudes, values, and ways of behaving” (Grunlan & Mayers 1988:39). Grunlan and Mayers also give Sir Edward Taylor’s definition: “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (p. 39).

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Before I pursue the implications of the simple definition I have offered, let me mention another proposal for looking at human beings made by Bronislaw Malinowski, an anthropologist from the 1940's. Malinowski presents seven basic human needs that humans strive to satisfy. This process he calls "Permanent Vital Sequence". These are the need:

1. to metabolise – to eat, drink and breathe.
2. to reproduce – to "be fruitful and increase in number" (Gen 1:28).
3. for bodily comfort – to regulate body temperature so that physiological functions can continue.
4. for safety – prevention of bodily harm.
5. for movement - human beings are not like trees or grass.
6. for growth – the challenge of going from a helpless dependent baby to an autonomous adult.
7. for health – how to maintain the biological system in a good state of repair and to fix it when it breaks down.

The "Permanent Vital Sequence" is the drive to meet these various needs. (Grunlan & Mayers 1988:40-50).

Culture, informs, shapes and describes the way a particular community responds to conception, birth, childhood, puberty, marriage and death. Culture shapes the way we respond to day by day challenges of living – how we "put food on the table" (to use culturally loaded image!), how we increase our population, what kind of shelters we consider to be appropriate for our comfort, how we protect ourselves from harm, how we get around, what arrangements are put in place to get us from cradle to independence, how we keep healthy and what we do when we get sick. Culture directs us regarding friendships and amusement. It shapes the way we express our joys, sorrows, hurts, affection. It describes what we consider beautiful or ugly. Culture has something to say about what is wrong and what is right; it influences what feels right and what feels wrong.

## **Christianity**

Christianity starts with God's initiative in revealing himself to humans, his own estranged creatures, with a view to establishing a reconciled relationship with as many as would respond appropriately to his overtures. Christianity is essentially relational. It leads to community. The community of the godhead draws into itself appropriately transformed humans who enter into relationship, not only with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but also with one another. As this community works out its response to the many challenges of living, what that looks like will be shaped by the characteristics of this community.

Since Genesis 3, human beings have been estranged from God. Genesis 6 testifies that things got so bad that the human condition filled God's heart with pain (Gen 6:6) instead of the delight of satisfaction that he had felt at the end of his creative enterprise (Gen 1:31). Paul has more bad news. It is not as if the cleansing waters of the Flood had fixed everything, because we are still all sinners who come woefully short of pleasing God (Rom 3:12, 20, 23). In this, Paul tells us, there is no difference. All nations and all tribes fall short.

## **Christianity and Culture**

If Christianity is relational and involves a relationship with God, and if all human beings are defective in some fundamental ways, it doesn't matter what culture they belong to. A reconciled relationship with a hitherto angry God must surely require significant changes in the way humans live if his disposition to them is to be different. Paul describes this transformation that comes through a faith response in Romans 5:1 and Ephesians 2:1-10. Not only is there a state of reconciliation with God, but a certain anticipation of future, permanent participation in the community of the triune God (Romans 5:2, 5).

If culture is a community's response to the many challenges of living, then the divine dimension inevitably modifies or transforms the way "born again" people respond. However we may have been programmed by our culture, Paul says we must live differently after we enter this community where God is King (Ephesians 2:10; Romans 12:2). It does not matter that our culture was soaked in religion, faith demands radical adjustments in our thinking and choices (Philippians 3:2-9; Romans 14:23). God's people in the Old Testament could not eat or drink what they pleased as they pleased. God was interested in what they ate, what they drank, how much they ate and drank. Nothing is a matter of indifference to God. Communities which eat other people cannot continue to eat dead members of their community or members of other communities. He is interested in the continuation of the human race, but human beings are not free to breed like rabbits under God's rule. There are ways to be fruitful and to multiply that accord with his pleasure.

### **African (Zambian) Culture**

We have said that culture is the way communities respond to the many challenges of living. Africa is a big continent with many nations and communities. It is inevitable that there will be great variation among the many communities and therefore one would have to make sweeping generalisations. Some of these will hold true for most communities, but each nation will also have some idiosyncrasies of its own. Zambia will manifest African cultural traits in common with other African communities, but it will have some peculiarly Zambian ones. Culture arises from the challenges of living as well as descriptive of the way we finally respond to these challenges. The process of arriving at ways of responding that is fairly uniform in any community comes through a learning process that anthropologists call enculturation. It is obvious that the challenges of living will come to us in different ways even on the basis of the environment in which we live. For instance, people living in the Zambian climatic conditions will not eat the same food as those living in the desert north nor build the same kind of houses nor have the same kind of clothing. People living near big expanses of water will face different challenges to those living in arid places. Culture answers a wide range of questions. What follows is limited to those characteristics of the Zambian culture that are significant in our thinking as we make relational and moral choices.

### **Making Moral Decisions in the Zambian Context**

In speaking of the Zambian context we acknowledge a dynamic in the society and culture that may not, strictly speaking, universally exist in a pure form. Yet this dynamic is recognisable and really influences the way we struggle with making choices. We need to be familiar with these forces in order to make intelligent Christian choices when they are compelling us to decide in ways that may be unchristian.

As we make choices in our context we need to know that we are influenced by the following things:

**Worldview** – this is how we view ultimate reality. The Zambian worldview has a significant place for the spiritual dimension. It shares this with most of Africa. The details may vary with regard to how the spirit dimension impacts life, but life has to take into account the spiritual realm.

**Beliefs** - How do we explain reality and events? What is true and what is not? How do we explain illness or bad fortune? If world view gives us the big picture, our belief system begins to equip us for navigating our way through our world.

**Values** – From what we truly believe we decide what is good or bad; what is admirable and what is to be despised. We decide what is important and what is a waste of time. This guides our choices and influences how we feel about issues.

**Behaviour** - What we do or do not do. This is the visible part that betrays, to some extent, the things we believe or feel that others cannot see. After they arrived at their destinations, the priest and the Levite of Luke 10 could have

told stories of how much pity they felt for the wounded man they found on the Jerusalem/Jericho road. They could have applied their experience with warnings not to travel alone on that road. But when the Samaritan got to the inn with the wounded man on his donkey, it does not take too much effort to believe Luke's record that "he took pity on him" (Luke 10:33).

## **The Forces that Influence Our Choices**

### **1. The power of community produces conformity**

In the African context the community is a powerful force. While some Western cultures may applaud the rebel, the good person, in the African context, is the one who conforms to society's expectations. This leads to conformity. We need to be aware, as Zambians, that this and other forces exert their insidious influence on our thinking, feeling and choosing in ways we may not be conscious of. This is not necessarily bad, but it may lead us to make wrong choices if we do not deliberately make choices with a view to pleasing God rather than fitting in with the community. (Romans 12:2).

### **2. Family solidarity demands loyalty**

What the family wants has great power to overrule the wishes and choices of the individual. The Christian needs to remember that the Lord Jesus warns that loyalty to him may well bring a sword between us and the family when family loyalty conflicts with his demands upon us (Matthew 10:34ff). Not a few, otherwise seemingly autonomous city people, have succumbed to the will of the family.

Family solidarity can also express itself in exploitation. Town people can exploit their relatives from the village, using them as cheap labour in such work as child-minding or house-cleaning while neglecting their future development.

On the other hand, the town worker can also be exploited by the extended family who might come and camp at his home and become a burden which family solidarity compels him to bear. During funerals people from "home" come to town, having borrowed money for travel and they expect to be looked after at the funeral place and then to be given repatriation funds, as well as money to cover their loans. One does not need to be considerate when you are family!

### **3. Social structures and hierarchy**

This gives society shape, but can be subject to abuse. Certain hierarchies are recognised.

Age: Older people are higher up.

Sex: Males are higher up.

Royalty: The chief is higher up.

Wealth: The richer are more important.

This hierarchy is sometimes hurriedly supported by verses taken out of context to give an essentially culturally desirable status biblical legitimacy by those enjoying it. One hears of Christian men beating their wives in order to teach them who is boss! It is saddening to hear an educated woman saying such subservience is the right place for women. Culture is powerful!

### **4. The spiritual dimension**

Much of traditional behaviour is governed by the need to avoid offending spirit beings. The choice of a child's name; response to sickness or other misfortune; the care with which we bury the dead; the various cleansing rituals – all these are determined by the need to keep the invisible beings happy. What keeps them happy, therefore, becomes the right thing to do in a given situation. If we are not aware of this dimension at work in our

context, we will be puzzled by the behaviour of people who quote all the right verses, but are happy to go to a traditional healer who does more than prescribe herbs because “*tuli ba filika*” (we are Africans).

## 5. The power of taboo

“*Tabacite fyoy*” (that’s not done) – stated without argument or accompanied with horrid consequences. The choices here are set by the unquestionable taboo or regulation. If Christians are not careful this will translate into legalism which simply replaces the old taboos with those that sound biblical (Colossians 2:6-23).

## Some Zambian Values

These describe what is regarded as important in the Zambian context as we make moral and relational choices.

***Lying*** is better than giving offence, especially to those higher up in the hierarchy.

***Promises that please*** are better even if you don’t know how you will keep them. Breaking promises is “no big deal”. This also applies to borrowing and not bothering to return unless pestered by the lender.

***Respect*** is important, especially to those above you. This is expressed in a variety of ways: e.g. *Gestures* - kneeling or genuflection, or *forms of address* – “ba cite”.

***Language*** – Indirect ways of speech and avoidance of “You-Me” talk. One might hear something like “they are calling you” where the “they” and the “you” are both plural, but are in fact referring to singular subjects.

***Freedom of relating*** – Keep distance from in-laws; avoid contact or eating together.

***Respect for the dead*** – How you bury them and what you say about them is important. This is not so much derived from the fact that one is dealing with image bearers, but it is grounded on our belief system that tells us that the dead can harm us if we do not do what is expected for them.

***Sympathy*** – Often people will say “Sorry” if you stumble even when they were not the cause of the stumbling. In a similar way, laughing at the misfortune of others (accident or deformity) is a taboo. This is based on the assumption that “*lelo cili pamunobe mailo cili pali iwe*” (today it is your friend’s misfortune, tomorrow it could be you). Of course one can easily see a biblical principle in the so-called golden rule (Luke 6:31), but we still need to know whether we are driven by superstition or God’s will. The outward act betrays what lies hidden, but the outward act does not always tell us infallibly what the source of the motivation is.

***Good Manners*** are important, bad manners can earn your family a bad name, make it difficult for you to find a life partner or even call upon your head a curse. Modern Zambia is beginning to lose this value with increased western influence.

***Modesty*** – Decent dressing is important even though some traditional gear can be scanty on top. Modesty in language leads to the use of euphemisms for sexual matters.

***Hospitality*** is obligatory and nothing is too much trouble for the visitor.

***Hard work*** is very important. Its absence can prejudice your matrimonial prospects.

***People oriented*** rather than event oriented. Your uncle can take up and waste your time in your office at work because of this value and the value of respect.

***Time is less important than events***. The so-called Zambian (or African) time is a well known phenomenon, unfortunately.

***Colonial influence*** – More than four decades after independence, our culture is not completely free. This leads to symptoms of a subjugated culture seen in subjugated values. We are inferior and our ways are inferior. “Made in England” is always better. Hence, even in Christian circles, foreign things are better, leading to an insufficient weighing of foreign intrusions. We end up copying crude American accents, dress fashions, music, the condom, etc. This influence says: “foreign is better”.

## **Living as Christians in the African Context**

We have seen that any community that exists inevitably formulates ways of dealing with the challenges of living. The God who draws us into community with himself and others knows the context from which he draws us. How we respond to life with him will certainly be shaped, to a degree, by our context and all contexts are essentially infiltrated by a principle that is hostile to God (1 John 2:15-17). Also, all contexts have their uniqueness which contributes to the beauty of variety. The African Christian's life is not expected to be a replica of the Western missionary's any more than the Gentile church was supposed to duplicate the Jewish missionary's church. This is one of the central issues Paul struggles with in Galatians. To live as African Christians, we need to start by being aware of the forces that shape us as Africans. Then we need to listen carefully to what our new King says is pleasing to him. We are to aim at "his good, pleasing and perfect will". When we do this we shall find that many of the things valued in African culture coincide with biblical teaching. These we must embrace even if our western brethren have outgrown them. Those things the Bible calls wrong, we must reject as wrong even if our culture has programmed us so that they don't feel wrong. They remain wrong even if "everyone is doing them".

## **References**

*Cultural Anthropology; A Christian Perspective* by Stephen A Grunlan and Marvin K Meyers (second edition 1988)

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