

Discovering Culture and its Influence in the Bible.

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Our contemporary historical period.

We are meeting in Zimbabwe, the second but last addition to the family of African nations that entered the long history of national self determination 32 years ago. When these nations of ours entered this history at the occasion of political independence, various choices were open to them. These options were:

1. To return to the "African" past which had been viciously interrupted and reintroduce it;
2. To continue their "colonial" present, which had been violently imposed and maintained at gun point or
3. find new forms of African structured existence, be it in the political, social, economic, cultural and religious life of their people.

We should be mindful of the fact that at that moment of the birth of African nations as republics and kingdoms, class formation and unequal distribution of power was already a matter of fact and not fiction. Classes which were destined to inherit power- political, economic and social- due to their proximity to colonial centres of power and the colonial masters already existed. In some situations these people were called *bwana* (boss), the name for their colonial masters even before the unceremonious departure of the **foreign *bwanas***. While their material conditions of existence enabled them to gain valuable knowledge and skills, and protected them from naked forms of oppression, they also made them, as a class, more vulnerable to co-optation into the universe of ideals and interests as well as thought patterns of the expelled *bwanas*. They were more conditioned than many of their compatriots to choose well known, comfortable and enjoyable models of political, economic,

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social and religious arrangements than reject them. And indeed when choices were actually made, they were made in such a way that the ground was laid for the present reality of political oppression of the working people, defenceless genders and powerless races. Firm ground was laid for national impoverishment by rich nations of the world and economic exploitation of the workers by the national petit-bourgeoisie in our countries. Hence the situation in which almost all towns and cities of Africa are surrounded by huge squatter settlements where fellow human beings live in humiliating conditions of abject poverty and squalor.

The **church *bwanas*** fared no better than their counter parts in secular power structures, in their use of power. They victimized and intimidated fellow clerics of the lower echelons of their church institutions and suppressed free religious expression and creativity of the African laity.

All the above powerful people in our societies banded together in their struggle to secure the subservience of their people as well as their hearts and minds and used the enormously powerful and effective combination of coercive, cultural and ideological weapons against the disgruntled armies of industrial workers, peasants and students.

What is of immediate relevance to us as Third World Theologians is that cultural and religious weapons which we fashioned and packaged elsewhere were and are still being used against the poor, females and black people and for the advancement of the material and ideological interests of the powerful classes, genders and races in our countries. As cultural-theological workers, we cannot completely exonerate ourselves from blame. We may as individuals, but certainly not as a class, because it is our fellow theologians who make and use these weapons in our name. This is the reason why Marx used to call priests and theologians the **religious police** of the church. We share responsibility for whatever happens in nations where Christianity is the dominant religion because **we determine the texts** (including biblical ones) that are suitable for use in the religious practice of our people. We also determine suitable and effective **uses** as well as suitable and effective **strategies** and **language**.

When I carefully look at the social situation in Africa today, I dare to say that as cultural and theological workers our moment of **KAIROS** has arrived. We have been discovered and identified as people who stand in the middle, the **crucial middle**, with valuable instruments that, if made with the right material, made well and used well and at the right place can make a difference in the escalating struggle of oppressed blacks, downtrodden genders, exploited and impoverished workers and peasants in Africa. We have all witnessed how religion and culture of these classes and people are coopted, commodified, commercialised and also used as means of upper class entertainment. We have also witnessed their angry awakening and struggle to claim justice and liberation and have to respond as cultural-theological workers of the crucial middle ground. When we do respond, and this we cannot postpone for even one day or delay anymore because as M.L. King Jr. once said "Justice delayed is justice denied". We have to be guided by Jesus Christ's choice and commitment in our swift and appropriate response. He chose the side of the poor, the weak, the humiliated and the marginalized. As such the choice has already been made for us and we have to live and work it out.

How do we live and work out our choice?

Various options lend themselves to us. We have to become **organic** cultural-religious workers and no longer **soft and safe middle ground** cultural-religious workers because it is only from within their vulnerable midst of the victims of our societies that we shall be able to see and hear the textual choices which they make when they open the biblical text. We shall consequently learn to leave out the texts that hurt and humiliate them, simply because the oppressed say that they are being hurt and humiliated by them, and not because we believe it or not or because what they say has any scientific backing. In the company of the victims of society, theologians also get to know those texts which are open to an abusive interpretation whether they pertain to economics, politics or the social structure. Our location inside the organized struggle of all victims of our societies should develop and strength our emotional sensitivities and intellectual awareness of the religious text of the victims and their preferred uses and interpretations and not ours. This is indeed a tremendous and almost impossible

challenge because it touches very directly and deeply on the deepest (raw and most sensitive) nerve of our academic training-**objectivity and scientific rigor** in our pursuit of the truth. But I personally don't see a contradiction between this on the one hand and commitment to the struggle of the victims of our societies on the other. What I find amazing is the following: We acknowledge very easily and without any hesitation or difficulty that the African **cultural text** (witten and unwritten) itself is problematic. We also easily and quickly acknowledge that the African cultural textual **usages** are often problematic. We easily acknowledge that the **strategies** of its usages are problematic. As far as our Christian **religious text** is concerned, we are prepared to concede that there may be some problems in all the above mentioned areas except with the text (the bible) itself and we do this in spite of all the evidence that comes from its victims who say that there are texts that hurt and humiliate.

What our resistance means.

If we persist in that refusal and do so in a situation in which some classes, people and groups in society are not being hurt by those texts while many others are, then we are throwing our power as cultural-religious workers on the side of the text and its intentions of selective hurting. And that hurts even more! We are colluding with it in its own practice of selective hurting and humiliating. If in addition to the text as an aggressive agent, there are in Africa a community of cultural workers, who use or interpret that text in such a way that it hurts and humiliates sections of our people, that practice will be tantamount to an undisguised choice to side with the theological intentions of those theologians and religious bwanas who hurt and humiliate people who are already in pain. As a matter of fact we for our part cannot believe that this could be a deliberate intention of theologians. If it does happen nonetheless, we must ask a further question as to why that persistence.

Why resistance?

As far as we are concerned, there are four or more possible explanations of the above resistance to taking a critical distance from the biblical text:

It could be due to our own individual ideological interests which are served by our resistance or collusion. Here an ideology would be "the desire by the dominant classes to gain hegemonic control of other classes through a rationalising universalisation of what are in effect sectional class interests" (James Joll in Mosala p. 18)

It could also be due to our immediate or long term material interests which would be threatened by our change of choice if this can become public knowledge, i.e. we would not move up the social ladder to join the ruling classes in our societies and churches. It could also be due to fear for actual intimidation based on actual experiences of those around us. Or lastly, it could also be sheer dishonesty, a possibility which is very remote.

On the other hand if we do acknowledge the existence of problems surrounding our biblical text as we readily do to those surrounding the African cultural text, including the unwritten traditional text, the question facing us is where do we go from here as trained cultural workers?

It stands to reason, as we have already established, that culture is a powerful social instrument in modern society. Its power during our time is enormously enhanced when it is combined with that of religion because religion tends to sacralize it, turning it into a religious culture and thereby elevates it beyond social scrutiny and critique. This is, of course, not a new phenomenon. Cultures of many societies of the past were elevated beyond human critique and operated as powerful religious cultures that were harnessed and deployed by opposing social classes and groups to advance their class interests. That was also the case with the cultures of biblical communities whose stories are recorded in the bible as we shall argue in this paper.

It is however, not an easy task to discover the sacralization and concrete operations of the cultures of biblical communities due

to/because of theological prejudice or straightjacketing that we have been subjected to in the course of our Western theological training. We have been trained, most if not all of us, to believe and have accepted that the bible is a religious document that should only be read theologically and not historically and materialistically. In some worse cases, some of our African theologians have even accepted the Calvinist mystifications of the hermeneutical process among which is one that the bible as the 'Word of God' interprets itself. And that, as the "Word of God" it can only be read uncritically and obediently by all Christians, especially the 'theologically initiated'. We have not done much to question the underlying Western liberal assumptions of that position namely that unity and uniformity as far as the approach to the bible is concerned, are normative only in so far as they advance the material interests of bourgeois society. That belief which betrays collusion with religious ideologues of Western capitalist societies, has consequently blinded us to, among other things, the presence and operations of culture in the social life of biblical communities. In some cases it has rendered us incapable of identifying cultural elements in the bible as cultural elements (and not theological teachings) and seeing how they operated to the good or bad/disadvantage of the communities in question. What is worse still, we as committed theologians are consequently unable to derive maximum benefit from that observation to be better able to address cultural dilemmas that retard the liberation struggles of the poor and the oppressed in our own societies.

What is even more difficult, is to determine the elements in the cultures of biblical communities which were used as ideological weapons of struggle by the opposing classes or groups in those ancient societies. The cause of this difficulty is ideological and analytical. It lies in the deliberate refusal by most liberal biblical scholars to admit that Marx was factually right when he stated that "the history of human societies is the history of class struggle". Many biblical scholars completely refuse, in the face of overwhelming evidence, to acknowledge that human societies, including biblical ones, have always been structured along class lines, that those classes have always pursued their class interests and lastly, that in the cause of pursuance of such class interests, class struggles ensued. Their refusal, we contend, is not for the

sake of the truth. It is firmly based on the significance which they attach to social unity and tranquility as a safeguard of the ideological hegemony and material dominance of the powerful in society, the religious ideologues of whom they are. That refusal we can forgive. What we find hard to forgive is the unconscious and sometimes deliberate collusion of African theologians in this matter, because their resistance hampers the emergence of a more adequate and incisive social analysis that is able to penetrate the hidden depths of modern societies and unearth their inherent structures, institutions, practices and mechanisms of rampant oppression and exploitation.

The solutions to these above mentioned problems, one hermeneutical and the other analytical, will put us in a position, as African theologians who come from societies where religious cultures are frequently invoked, especially by the rich and the powerful who incidentally control the church, as ideological weapons in social struggles that are still raging in our societies, to intervene creatively and meaningfully. Many theologians of oppressed segments of our modern societies have come to recognize that, without effecting a hermeneutical break with dominant liberal hermeneutics and making a new hermeneutical beginning, no liberative theology is possible. This has been the case with Black Theologians, Latin American Liberation Theologians and Asian Liberation Theologians. As far as culture is concerned, it is Feminist and Womanist Theologians especially, as representatives of people whose oppression is among other things, grounded on and entrenched in patriarchal and male dominated cultures who keep hammering on the necessity of a new hermeneutic in their theological quest.

Having said that, we hasten to acknowledge that some African theologians, especially biblical scholars, have made an enormous contribution in the task of lifting out cultural elements in the bible and used them in their theological constructions. We are thinking here of Kwesi Dickson in his "Theology in Africa", John Pobee in his "Towards an African Christology", Mercy Odoyoye, Sister Theresa and many others. The weakness of their work lies, however, in the analytical area. They still perceive of African culture as monolithic, classless, genderless and struggle-less and

consequently fall short in their attempt to adequately resource the struggles of oppressed and struggling classes, races and genders in our societies. They end up arming little David, the peasant, with king Saul's unsuitable weapons, to use a biblical metaphor.

It is our intention in this paper to explore a way in which we can solve this twofold problem i.e. a hermeneutical and analytical problem by going beyond the above mentioned African approaches.

A hermeneutic for a Christian culture

We wish to open our search with an assumption that the biblical text is itself a product of struggle, a site of struggle and a record of class struggles. It is an open secret that the determination of which books were to be included in our contemporary bibles went through a fierce struggle which ended in a partial stalemate, hence the two bibles. This issue we elect not to address due to the enormity of the issue and the brevity of time at our disposal. It is also a fact that the biblical text provides a picture of struggles which raged during ancient times and that the writers of these stories decided on the actual presentation of those struggles, hence the existence of different and sometimes even conflicting traditions of the same story, and also that in their choices they influence the final story as presented to the contemporary readers as well as their reading of it. In other words they chose sides in the events they reported about and move us to adopt their choices. This is an important issue to note, but in our present paper we shall not deal with it.

What is of immediate interest to us and which we wish to address, is the fact that we cannot read the bible without noticing that in it, we are dealing with people who are organized socially, economically, politically and religiously and that in the organization of their societies, conflicting classes or interest groups emerged. We can take the famous text of 1 Samuel 10 on the emergence of the monarchy in Israel as an example. What is very evident to an analytical materialist reading of this text is that the emergence of the monarchy was also the point of the crude emergence of social classes in Israelite society of that time. To this fact one should add

that these classes continued to exist in Israel until and after the time of Jesus in the 1st century A.D. As I.J.Mosala puts it: " In other words, the Bible is rent apart by the antagonistic struggles of the warring classes of Israelite society in much the same way that our world is torn asunder by society's class, culture, racial and gender divisions." (Mosala I.J.1989,p16)

We cannot assume, however, that every one of us will see the same things in our reading of the bible or even the above mentioned text. A way of textual approach and reading that will ensure that we do is required. In our case we align ourselves with Mosala. He gives us a clue to what appears to be a good method in the above quotation when he says:"in the same way in which our world is torn asunder by society's class, culture, racial and gender divisions". In other words, our starting point is an analytical reading of our world in order to acquire epistemological lenses and concepts before we encounter the world of the bible analytically. It is these lenses which will hopefully enable us to discover ancient equivalences of contemporary social phenomena like classes, genders and cultures in antagonistic relations and conflict. They will hopefully enable us to go further and discover the biblical class counterparts of modern classes and relate the former classes, their interests and struggles to those of contemporary African societies. We will in other words be in a position to relate the modern working class to the biblical working class, the modern peasantry to the biblical peasantry, their interests, cultures and struggles. The same will apply to the ruling classes of both historical periods, their interests and struggles. As Mosala says: " The process of a liberating biblical hermeneutical appropriationbegins with a critical appreciation of the history and culture of the hermeneuticians." (I.J.Mosala 1989, p.99) This is the first step in the hermeneutical process we are describing. The other step which is equally important and constitutes the converse of the former, consists of our critical appropriation of the histories and cultural struggles of biblical communities for contemporary cultural struggles.

To be concrete, in our dealings with biblical material we have, for our part as South Africans, to relate for example, the story of the contemporary exodus of Black South Africa to that of the Exodus

of the Hebrew slaves in Pharoanic Egypt as Black Theologians currently do and discern the inherent dynamics and mutual enlightenment and resourcing of one by the other. On the other side, we have to relate the cultural practices of the S.A.rulers and relate them to those of the ancient Pharaohs of Egypt in order to discern the commonalities and differences which are existent between them and are worth knowing by those who are engaged in cultural resistance.

As it has been made clear in Harry Nengwekhulu's paper, that in every class society, each one of the opposing classes invokes culture even religious culture in the struggle not only for material interests but also for ideological supremacy or hegemony². It is the tendency of ruling classes especially, to elevate their culture and selected elements of the culture of the underclasses to the status of national culture that has to be accepted as normative culture. This is true not only of modern ruling classes but of biblical ruling classes as well. It is also the practice of oppressed classes that have gained a certain level of class consciousness to struggle to retain subversive elements of their own working class culture or peasant culture at the displeasure of the ruling classes and to use it in their own struggles. In other words, these classes and groups refuse to surrender all social space to the cultures of ruling classes and instead work hard to win some of that "national" space for their cultures. This is true not only in our modern societies but in biblical societies as well. The story of the struggle for land between king Ahab and Naboth is the case in point. (1 Kings 21) In this tragic story, both Naboth and Ahab invoke a cultural practice either to protect or acquire that piece of land. In the case of Naboth the basis of his refusal to yield to the king's request that later appears to be a demand, is the cultural practice that was intended to protect the poor and weak in Israelite society against the greed of the rich and the powerful. It stated that land was inalienable and should remain inside the family throughout all generations. This cultural practice was reinforced by an invocation of religion-' The lord forbid....' (v.3). In his response Ahab

²H. Nengwekhulu's paper entitled: "The dialectical relationship between culture and religion in the struggle for liberation" appeared in Vol. 4 No 2, Nov. 1990 of this Journal.

through his wife, also invoked a religious cultural practice that linked the rule of kings with the divine. Jezebel, the queen, wrote in a charge sheet against Naboth: 'You have cursed God and the king.'(v. 10) We can see that in this uneven contest for land, one cultural practice has been elevated to 'national' status hence its greater weight over against that which protects the weak and the poor. That notwithstanding, Naboth, the peasant from Jezreel, still used the culture of the poor as a defensive weapon against ruling class cultural attack, albeit unsuccessfully. It is also noteworthy how the ruling classes became the ones that determined and enforced the dominant or 'national culture' and in this case in favour of their classes. It is the 'elders and nobles who dwell in the city' (v.11) who organized the court hearing and formulated the charge as well as executed its findings. (v.13) This story is to my mind a clear case illustrating the point that class struggle was also waged at a cultural level. Before we are accused of selecting an isolated story and making a principle from it, we wish to contend that in fact the entire liberative strain in the Old Testament which is represented by the Exodus-Sinai tradition as opposed to the David-Zion tradition operates from the premise that the culture of the oppressed is a legitimate instrument of struggle. It is in this afore mentioned tradition that the radical prophets of the Northern Kingdom struggled against the royal house of David in the Southern Kingdom.

We can also trace continuity of the same strain in the New Testament, especially in the gospel stories. Here again, the story of the gospel story of the feeding of the five thousand by Jesus in Mark 6:35-44 constitutes a clear example of a discourse of cultural struggle, this time in the economic arena

In the above mentioned story we find a struggle between two cultural practices. One is a culturally established practice of sharing whatever one has, which was still entrenched in the rural areas of Palestine during Jesus' time. The other is an equally strong if not stronger cultural practice of individual and exclusive ownership of the means of livelihood which was entrenched in the ruling class introduced and dominated money economy that was based in the urban centres of 1st century Palestine. According to the former cultural practice, you eat by belonging while according

to the latter, you eat through buying. The former practice was, as we said above, strongest in the peasant communities. It was however threatened by the dominant money economy based culture which was encroaching rapidly into the rural areas and pushing it back more and more. The fact that the disciples who come from the rural areas of Galilee act, at least in this story, as agents of the dominant culture illustrates the point. On the other hand, the fact that Jesus successfully asserted the legitimacy and relevance of the culture of sharing also illustrates the resilience of that threatened rural culture in that struggle for supremacy between the two economic systems. It is further important to note the sacralization of the cultural practice of the rural peasantry through the prayer of Jesus. This gives it greater legitimacy among those who have to struggle for survival. It also gives their economic struggle itself a sacred legitimacy in a religious atmosphere where the struggle for God was at a climax during the time of Jesus.

It is in the Gospels especially that the struggle for cultural hegemony is more pronounced and explicit and was fought at all levels of human existence-social, political, economic and religious between the Jesus community on the one hand and the temple based ruling classes on the other hand. F.Belo, M. Clevenot, S.Rostagno, Ched Myers and other christian materialists have done a very extensive job in their attempt to addresss this struggle for hegemony which impinged very deeply and directly on the concrete life of people. In that struggle, as F. Belo sees it, the contest was expressed in terms of what should be at the centre of society. In the case of the Jesus community, liberation of human life especially that of the marginalized should be the determinant in all social, economic, political and religious practices while in the case of the ruling classes the preservation of the existing social order was the primary concern, hence their insistance on an unbending and rigid upholding of the religious law in all situations. The conflict for these opposing views and cultures characterize the entire encounter between the Jesus community and the temple based religious ruling classes. This is the conflict that ended like in the case of Naboth, in the victory of the powerful and the execution of Jesus on the cross.

In the case of Jesus and his community, the conflict was not simply

over culture as such. It was generated by the realization on both sides of the connection of and impact that culture has on the thinking, attitudes and actions of people in society and that the one who controls it, can use it as a formidable instrument.

We are not unaware of the ideological critique that has been levelled at this approach. It has been accused of reading into or imposing modern phenomena on the bible. An even more serious accusation is that of an ideological bias towards Marxism. To the first accusation we can say that it is based on the denial, which we don't share, of the continuity element in human history i.e. that the history of biblical communities has no material connection to the histories of contemporary societies. If this were true, we would then pose the question why we have to concern ourselves, as modern people, with the bible at all, if no material connection exists between our societies and those described in the bible. We, for our part, affirm the existence of continuities and discontinuities in the entire human history. And as a way of accommodating the finer differences that result from obvious historical development, we have spoken of equivalences instead of identicalities. As far as the second accusation is concerned, i.e. that of ideological bias towards Marxism, Marguez J. Bonino has provided what to us is an adequate answer which we shall not repeat. (M. Jose Bonino 1975) We hope that it suffices for us to say that no hermeneutical approach is free of ideological contamination and that we consequently have to make a choice that is dictated to by our organic connection to the struggles of oppressed people in our communities as well as by our earnest desire to be obedient to the imperatives of the gospel, to side with the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters in the world today. To us the above satisfies that criteria.

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