



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Religious, Cultural and Social Burdens as Major Contributing Factors in the Level of Poverty in Africa

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Abstract:

The paper seeks to stimulate a debate on the role of religion, culture and society in addressing poverty situation in Africa. The focus of this article however is restricted to the study area of Western Kenya where cultural practices have actually abetted various limitations which have perpetuated rather than alleviating poverty. Key areas of our concern in this article include but not limited to prudent management of resources whereby setting of top priority programs is accorded due recognition. It is a call to review both national and community's cultural beliefs and practices to be in tandem with the prevailing context.

The main debate this article ignites is based on a recent research the author did. The research findings are based on the five case studies presented here. Death is a tragedy that lives with us. However, the way cases of death are being handled by various communities would have serious impact on their economic life.

This article also addresses policy issues regarding poverty alleviation. We wish to interrogate, the role of political class and religious institutions in this regard. Academic paper by a political scientist is also put on radar and its limitations highlighted.

Key words: Death, transformation, Poverty, Priority, Religion

1. Introduction

The title for this article did attract a lot of interest from my friends and colleagues and I am obliged to explain why I came up with it. We are living in a world in which material wealth is considered to be the epitome of divine blessings. The annual military budgets in the world are enough to alleviate poverty completely. The US expenditure on space technology and military hardware is enough to meet or alleviate Africa's food problem.¹ The money that is either embezzled or mismanaged by those in power is enough to address food crises in the continent of Africa. Poverty exists in Africa in the midst of the vast natural and human resources available. Despite having Christian leadership in many African nations, and despite having many rich Christians, there is still poverty.

The primary responsibility of any religion is simply to make people who they are meant to be. It is for this reason why concepts like righteousness, holiness, and wholeness are more for religious institutions than for secular bodies. True religion cannot evade subjects like economy, politics, social sciences, communication at every level etc. The impression everyone would get when things are wrong in a religious dominated society is that the religion is dead. When we talk about religion from the African context, there are three major players we have in mind: Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions. Whereas Christianity and Islam are well prescribed as religions of the book with clearly articulated doctrines and mannerisms, African traditional religion is not as much advantaged but still would boast of deeper penetration in the life of the people.

In this article I seek to show that in Africa religion has failed to address poverty and instead has perpetuated it to a sorry state. Poverty level in Africa cannot be compared with any part in the world.² However, the continent is endowed with enormous resources tapped and untapped. For a very long time, Nigeria had been known for its religious conflicts and economic wars which have led to lose of lives in thousands. Oil, which is commonly referred to as black gold, has not given the most populous nation in Africa the joy and stability that would be expected to go along with such economic resources. Poverty in the midst of wealth is in itself a major challenge to the entire humanity. The question therefore is: how long should Africa still suffer because of poverty perpetuated by unavoidable conditions? Even though we are living in a polarized world where people prefer to identify themselves with their ethnic, racial, or social origin, a common bond of humanity that unites us must equally compel us to raise questions and seek answers on how poverty can be addressed.

¹ <http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/breakdown>

² Poverty in Africa From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia Jump

One of the main issues that tend to attract our attention as a people is not our final destiny, what will happen when we die since this is an eschatological dilemma that is the sole preserve of religious speculation. Our primary concern, however, is how to address poverty related problems. We also have to acknowledge the existence of disparity at every level in human society. Social and economic inequality does exist but this does not necessarily place blame on one class of society alone. Everyone has a contribution in the escalating level of poverty. It might appear that the rich are given the lion share of the blame, but our research findings show clearly that the rich takes the blame on account of their being advantaged in many areas. This article seeks to challenge every player in our economy to appreciate not only his or her role as significantly in demand, but also to help those who are less advantaged to participate according to their ability and resources within the arena of economy. I strongly believe that the church has an agenda on social and economic issues but a more concerted approach to such issues has not been adequately addressed. I tend to analyze some vital options that the church and society must adopt if it were to address this problem effectively. This article seeks to stimulate an action oriented approach to poverty reduction. Some of the highlights in this article are based on research I carried out recently. I wanted to find out the extent of relevance of religious, cultural and political institutions in addressing poverty in Kenya, more specifically Western Kenya. When we talk of western Kenya, there are three major ethnic communities which are dominant in the region and somehow share the same cultural and religious life. These are the Luos of Nyanza, traditionally known as fishing community, the Luhyas of western region, and the Kissis.

2. Religious Nihilism

Religion is one of the strongest institutions in our society that binds millions across social and political divide. However, in as much as it true that religious teachings focus more on moral and spiritual matters, mundane issues are always prevalent and bothersome to a critical level to be ignored. The coming of Christianity in western Kenya introduced the local communities to a new dispensation: new education systems, code of ethics, health, and generally a new aspect of civilization courtesy of the missionary initiatives. The concept of worship as a communal activity had actually enhanced collective participation in these new dispensational orders thus culminating into a life where sharing became a common feature. However, the new concept of sharing tended to be restricted only to the converts. The converts had certain things in common to share and being the people of light, they had very little to do with the principalities of darkness! It was therefore inevitable that a class society was in the making.

This is the passage that a pastor picked on a Sunday gathering to hammer home his point:

Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.³

This verse like any other passage of the scripture must be expounded from both its original context and our own context if we are to understand its meaning. What the pastor later explained as part of his homily left me baffled. The theme of his message was somehow meant to encourage his Christians not to worry about their present predicaments: school fees, food, accommodation, security and other related issues with financial implications. The focus should be Jesus Christ the Son of the Living God! I learnt that the congregation was keenly following him and he had perfectly captured their attention!

There are critical questions that any sensible person would wish to raise. How would Jesus of Nazareth respond to our own human conditions which are marked with unbearable socio-economic conditions of great proportion! How is faith in Christ going to help us with good accommodation, pay for school fees for our children, and heal our wounds? If we continue focusing only on this which are above, then who will respond to the mundane matters of the present life? It is such fundamentalist ideas which blind many people and they cannot be able to address the glaring reality of poverty.

Both Islam and Christianity have failed to address the African commonality but instead created religious tension that has taken a violent dimension. Even though this tension is not as pronounced in western Kenya as it is along the coast where Muslims are the majority, a course for worry is evident among the Christians especially about the increasing number of Muslims in onetime Christian's only zones. There are mosques in almost every district and major public schools. The threat of such infiltration is adversely affecting Christian's quest for holistic evangelism as they appear to go apologetic way. Issues like poverty, insecurity, diseases, and wanton destruction of environment are no longer the key subjects among religious people. The focus is on their self preservation. Most sermons in churches are tailored on giving but little attention is paid on how to produce. The vibrancy of churches are measured against the level of giving and the number of attendance, but not the quality of their commitment, the social agonies they pass through, or domestic violence they suffer. The pastors are keener on demanding tithe than offending his Christians by provoking them to address key issues affecting their economy, politics and social life. The two major religions have become *extentionists* with no real content for developing a whole person. As a pastor of 25 years, I want to acknowledge and attribute this vital deviation to insecurity, the fear of being vanquished by the other religion. As many Christians are opting for alternative lifestyle compatible with the popular culture, the thin layer of religious consciousness is slowly getting torn and dumped. The church is faced with dare need for relevance especially at a time when myriad issues of socio-economic nature are posing great challenge to its very existence. The song is the same since 1976 when John Westerhoff wrote in his book *Will our Children have faith*:

"Institutionally we may be less than Christian; still we are created by God for life in community. Our understanding of the Christian faith can never be individualistic. Christian life is to be lived in and for the community of God. Too often we led persons to a life of

³ Colossians 3:1-3 NIV

mere inwardness or personal piety, thus blessing the existing social, political and economic order regardless of the injustices they may perpetuate".⁴

Religious institutions are also faced with the prospect of fundamentalism being at their center. Fundamentalism is a major challenge affecting major religions. Among the Christians fundamentalists are more dominant among the Pentecostal churches. However, even protestant and catholic churches also have its share of membership. They are opposed to any form of dialogue with other faiths and reject all forms of pluralism and relativism. The idea of the "sameness" of the Christian "God" with "God" in other religions is rejected.⁵

3. Socio-Cultural Causes of Poverty

Poverty level in Africa appears to be on the rise even as the world is embracing new technologies to deal with factors of production in response to the rate of consumption. Blending the spiritual and doctrinal elements in religion with socio-economic factors would act as a panacea for collective bargain between religious institutions and their adherents. Social ministry should be at the apex of religious propagation, for such a ministry will set a clear line of engagement in addressing critical issues of justice, social and economic equality and inject a real sense of relevance.

Causes of poverty are well known and it will be a waste of time to repeat all of them in this section. Any discussion on poverty must take cognizance of people's spirituality, their politics, economy, environment, and culture. Among the root causes of poverty, some are linked to immutable factors like climate, geography and history. By contrast deficient governance, which is subject to change, includes a core set of factors that perpetuate poverty. Entrenched corruption and rent seeking elites, lack of respect for human rights, weak institutions and inefficient bureaucracies, lack of social cohesion and political will to undertake reforms are all common features of bad governance and inimical to sustainable development and poverty reduction.⁶ But in this section we are going to give weight to cultural practice as one of the worst cases we have in Africa, which unfortunately has not been given its due attention.

3.1. Laziness

Another culture, which has affected economic growth and underdevelopment, could be attributed to laziness and dependency syndrome. The world is growing towards liberalism and yet some of us are still captives of our cultural heritage. We still believe in communal property ownership. The situation is worsened when there is only one person in a family who is working. Every relative will target his little salary. It becomes very difficult for the working people to budget for their family alone. Resources will always appear to be scarce so long as the dependency ratio remains as it is. Sharing, if it is overly emphasized, will amount to exploitation. The scripture is very clear on this! Those who are lazy and cannot work must not be given free food. Working is a part of contribution we have to make towards resource generation. We shall therefore be sharing what we generate without purely depending on the sweat of others.

The Bible is very clear about how we should treat lazy people. Paul feels obliged to address this important subject by giving guidance on what should be done to the lazy people. : They should be kept at a distance when food is ready.⁷ This rule applies only to those who are physically in a position to contribute in nation building but deliberately choose to take a back seat as they wait to reap from other people's sweat.

What causes or promotes laziness? There are several factors, which can be attributed to laziness. In African culture, individualism is treated with contempt. There is a spirit of *communitarianism* that gives others the advantage to benefit from the collective pool of resources. The concept of communal ownership gives the lazy people a recipe to make advances into the resources of relatives without paying any price. The wealth of a relative will be seen in the wider context of "ourship"! The property of a hard working brother will be seen not as his but as "ours". This primitive perception is a major cause of dependency syndrome in most African societies. But the question is how do we take seriously the balance between the religion that promotes love and the economic reality of our own situation? To what extent should we take care of others without straining our own family resources? We must take into account that the value put on family relations in Africa is exceedingly extended. In as much as we would not wish to discard our culture, there has to be a second thought in our examination of some of our cultural practices which, in one way or another, have contributed to poverty situations.

3.2. Eating Habits

At this juncture, I wish to go back to the story of the feeding of the 5000.

[John 6:12-] when they had all had enough to eat, he (Jesus) said to them - Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.⁸ There is no doubt in my mind that Jesus' position on food security should not be underestimated. In Jesus mind, it appears that it is sinful, immoral and almost a criminal act to waste food. Jesus was not only concerned about the plight of the hungry people, but also about the culture that perpetuates wastage. Millions of tons of food go to waste every year as a result of our culture of wastage.

⁴ Westerhoff H John , *Will our children have faith?* , Seabury Press NY 1976

⁵ Anono A.C. Temple (ED) *Emerging Christian expressions and challenges of Christian fundamentalism*, page 8 All Africa Conference of Churches 2003

⁶ World Development Report – 1992, Development of the Environment

⁷ II Thessalonians 3:10 NIV

⁸ John 6:12ff

During harvests, a lot of grains go to waste because of poor harvesting method and poor storage facilities. Another culture, which has promoted wastage, but has not been openly talked about, is attributed to our eating habits. The eating habit amongst the community of western Kenya is not good news at all. Majority of the people from low income earners cannot afford fridges and this is all the more reason why they need to prepare meals just enough for their immediate consumption to avoid possibility of having leftovers.

3.3. Excessive Hospitality

African hospitality especially among the rural folk, has also contributed to food deficit to some extent. The culture that requires that every time a visitor comes he must be cooked for needs revisiting. We always act on assumption that every visitor, irrespective of his time of arrival must be served with a meal. Our culture does not allow us to inquire the opinion of the visitor in this regard. The contrary would be treated as bad manners. A lot of food, therefore, goes to waste as left over.

Excessive hospitality drains family resources in a big way. The impact is more felt amongst communities, which still regard food as the most important token of hospitality. When hospitality is to continue be identified with our willingness to provide food on the table, not because of genuine hunger but simply to fulfill some basic traditional expectation, then we are to be the most pitied of all men. What we are seeing here is a direct wastage of food. Traditional culture in western Kenya does not expect the host to ask whether the visitor would like something to eat or not. This is considered as being either rude or selfish. The norm is that you prepare what is there and if there is nothing you are at liberty to borrow from a neighbour.

I personally witnessed a case when an elderly man from our village almost ran into self-exile. This had nothing to do with politics. Mr. Okoth (not real name) was expecting very special guests, the son in-law. Since this was to be the latter's first official visit during which he was expected to bring bride price it was understandable that Mr. Okoth had to do everything possible to give the best entertainment to his guests. But since Mr. Okoth was a person of very low means, a neighbour who runs a local shop willingly accepted to give him some items on credit hoping he will pay for them later after the departure of the guests. It is common knowledge that in-laws always during their first visit arm themselves with good money or items of similar worth. But to everyone's disappointment, the guest brought only one thousand Kenya shillings and a bicycle. Mr. Okoth, his friends and entire family were disappointed. What were they going to tell the good shopkeeper? Everybody in the village, save for Mr. Okoth and close confidants knew so well that the in-laws brought a lot of money. Mr. Okoth literally ran away from the wrath of his creditors. The visitors were only three and definitely one chicken and a loaf of bread would be enough for their one-day stay. But the norm will not allow this modest budget to be implemented. The budget for entertainment must include several joy riders; the clan elders, friends and other close relatives from every category of age group.

Excessive hospitality is detrimental to domestic economic stability. Hospitality is also witnessed in our attitude towards gifts and other donations given to special guests. Special guests in contemporary African society are the rich and influential people- the potential guests of honor at fundraising. The irony is that sometimes the gifts they are given together with the cost of entertaining them surpass their own contributions!

3.4. Home Making

There is also what we can call, the African traditional way of putting up a home. Most communities, especially in western Kenya, still believe in the traditional way that compels a married male adult to have his own homestead. The result is that many agricultural lands are turned into houses. The culture also prohibits inheriting houses left behind by dead relatives. This amounts to destruction of buildings, which could have been turned into orphanages and homes for the needy.

3.5. Tribute to Death

For many years death has not only claimed people's physical lives, it has to a great extent contributed to the worsening economic situation in Africa. The difference between the Christian faith and African Christians is very clear. For Christian faith our focus is on life, how we can live to eternity especially the second life after death. For African Christians the focus is on death, how we can stop death from visiting us. However, there are three rites, which are important, to both: birth, initiation (baptism), marriage (wedding), and death. No one can chose or decide when and where to be born. But one can choose whether to marry or not to marry. But as for death, there is no choice. Everyone born must die. From the dust did we come and unto dust shall we return. Even though Christians tend to lessen the impact of death by giving it new names e.g. Slumber or using tough words against it e.g. "Death where is thy victory?"-But the New Testament puts emphasis on life as opposed to death itself. The scripture faces death as it faces all realities. But its interest is in life, and death is treated more or less incidentally as that from which men are saved.⁹

Death is understood as one of the most dreaded and yet inevitable natural phenomena. Man finds it hard to reconcile himself to dying. He believes, and this is probably the oldest of his beliefs-that something in him survives the death and decay of his body. But the shadow of our inevitable end is thrown backwards over our entire human experience. In the midst of life we are in death-and contemporary philosophies like that of Heidegger read off the deepest meaning of our life as an "existence-unto-death". Michael Bame puts it in this manner:

⁹ Read scripture

Death is a natural occurrence though it may appear fearful and mysterious to us, for it is inherent in all that happens. The eternal and universal law of death is written over each stage and moment in human life. We therefore are not looking at things rightly when we view death as something which awaits us in the future at the end of the road.¹⁰

Our focus in this section is not the definition or meaning of death *per se* or its expressions in different forms: spiritual, biological, or political. We are neither going to waste much time on other causes of death other than its direct or indirect connection with poverty. How has death as an inevitable reality in our midst affect the level of poverty among the community of Western Kenya? It may be difficult to respond to this question unless we first of all approach the issues of culture. Most cultural rites associated with death have become unnecessarily expensive to sustain. I use the term “unnecessary” to show that some of the rites are no longer relevant and must be done away with. Even though the dynamics of culture would dictate a certain pattern of orientation, there is no point to allow them to continue if their values are already obsolete. Death in African context reveals a lot of things about us. Most African communities put much value on rites associated with death. When death occurs, friends and relatives of the bereaved would be generous in displaying their bereavement. Contributions in cash and in kind would come in different styles. Mourners would forgo the comfort of their houses to keep night vigil at the diseased home-and this could take several days, weeks or months! No progressive work will be going on during the “mourning period”! Every “truly” concerned person must take days off to attend to the funeral matters. They will be gathering in big and small groups, not to discuss the poor state of the economy and a way forward, but they will be gathering to eat, to drink, and to gossip. Few people will be genuine enough to offer words of comfort to the bereaved. Again, in Africa every person known to the diseased is equally bereaved. The danger is that if many people know a person, how much collective time and so many a people attending to death will waste resources? What will be the impact of this on economy? It is generally considered bad manners to engage in any economic activity when death strikes a relative or a close friend. Death has brought a new kind of colonialism that affects our attitude to work and poverty reduction. By the time a person is buried and the dust settles, the cost of mourning shall have been extremely high.

Death is one of the most dreaded passages in human life span. Every culture has its own way of treating it. Many myths had been doing the round with regard to the origin and consequences of death. However, one thing, which almost all the world cultures have in common, is the dignity that is accorded the diseased especially during and after the burial ceremony. Human beings believe that they are special species with a life span that extends beyond the horizon of death. For this very reason, human beings have refused to believe that death is the last of man. This awareness may seem to border on some religious presupposition. There is a deliberate attempt to justify our behaviour during death as a normal human activity with no relevance to either religion or superstition.

Our task in this section is not to explain the origin or consequences of death as perceived by different world cultures. Our principal duty is to expedite the very nature and social and economic impact of human behaviour during death

In western Kenya death has become the most expensive rite to manage. It is the most tendered of all the rites in most cultures in Africa. The irony is that the cultural values attached to death outstrip other most essential obligations to the extent that it has contributed to the depleting economic situation in most African communities. Recently I carried out a research in Siaya and Bondo districts in western Kenya and the findings were very astonishing. I used my students during their practical attachment to attend every burial they could. The instruction was clear; they had to play it safe by volunteering to be members of the funeral committees. The idea was to get the inside information of the budget cost and priority areas according to the funeral committees. The objective of the research was to establish that:

- Most Luos of Western Kenya spend more on funerals than on saving life.
- Most urban-based well fare groups have death as the principal uniting factor.

The following concerns were taken into account:

- Social statuses of the deceased people within the research area
- The place or location where death occurred
- The cost of coffin
- The cost of feeding the mourners
- The cost of preserving the body
- The number of days the body took before burial
- The cost of treatment before death occurred
- The degree of the involvement of friends and relatives during sickness and during death.
- Logistics including, making funeral programs, seating arrangements, transport etc.

¹⁰ Michael Bame Bame, *Death and Everlasting Life*, Africa Challenge Series, page 9 , 1994



From the above statistics it is apparently clear that death is given priority at the expense of life. Africans waste a lot of resources in caring for the dead more than helping the needy. Whereas most urban-based well fare groups would treat death as an emergency, little attention is given to helping those who need medical care. Death cannot be an emergency in the real rational world. Rapid forces should therefore target only cases of economic shortage and how to empower the people to wrestle the burdens of our time. The five sample cases I have highlighted show very clearly that eating habit at funerals is still a major challenge in western Kenya. Some of the families of the bereaved are normally left with no financial help after the burial ceremony. No one would talk about the future of the families who had been depending entirely on the departed members for livelihood. Budgets that prioritize feeding of mourners with little regard for the bereaved families is primitive so to say the least. All this happen in the name of dignified send off! What dignity there is in a sending off that leaves people in debt or that is only interested in pleasing the dead rather than the living?

4. Wrong Priority

Priority in Africa has not taken into account fundamental principles required in food production as one of the major factors affecting poverty level in Africa. There is no country that can confidently claim sovereignty if it cannot feed its people. Political independence has been challenged by several factors, and we should not be ashamed to mention greed for wealth and power as some of the major causes. Most People who still harbour the primitive view with regard to the efficacy of communal property ownership will find it difficult to survive in this new dispensation. Manna has refused to fall, the transcendent God is still watching at a distance seemingly oblivious of everything we say and do. The rich west is no longer friendly enough to open their wallets without unattainable conditions! The traditional rainmakers of Africa are either all dead or power has been taken over by the modern meteorologists. The difference between the modern meteorologists and the traditional African rainmaker is very clear. The former can only focus on what is likely to happen in terms of weather, but the latter will go further as to bring rain when it is needed! Africans are virtually in perpetual need. Their limited finances and technology cannot help them in reducing food deficit. Big lands have been overused due to poor farming methods, thus making the lands lose their productivity.

Another problem affecting most people in Africa is associated with value attached to cash as a symbol of power and influence. This perception has led many farmers to prefer cash crop to food crops. What is now apparent is that most farming communities suffer from food shortage and in most cases they have to rely on relief food from other donors. Poverty reflects itself in severe food insecurity, and any nation that strives to address the issue of poverty must give food production a first priority.

5. Effect on Families

Families are now prone to domestic conflicts arising majorly from socio-economic factors. News papers in Kenya reports almost on a daily basis cases of domestic violence. Suicide cases are on the rise and mostly attributed to underlying tensions in the families. Accountability at the family level is key to accountability at any level. Family provides foundational courses in morality and self

discipline and cannot be ignored whenever we talk about good governance and quality management of our public institutions. There are some correlations which I am not ready to discuss in this article.

The scarce efforts to plan national policies and actions to enhance communities' capacities to nurture the families often lead to high divorce rates, irresponsible parenting and consequent abuse and neglect of children. Many income earners in families who have become unemployed as a result of African economic realities are not able to provide for their families. This in turn causes tension in families.¹¹

6. Dealing with Poverty: Social and Political Approaches

Poverty eradication strategies are some of the superficial maneuvers by governments and NGO's to hoodwink the poor into believing that they are doing much to arrest their situation. Canaan Banana, the first President of Zimbabwe, calls the poor the powerless, voiceless who are at the mercy of the powerful. The powerful are the oppressors and are the rich. The condition of the poor is such that their powerlessness and *voicelessness* do not allow them a space in strategy thinking. They are the types who will be asked to pack and go when economy is not performing. They are the ones who will be sitting on green grass to be lectured by the rich and powerful who will always be taking big allowances for lecturing the poor on the state of affairs!

Poverty has a pernicious effect on society. It is a major destabilizing factor in society. When expectations are high and the resources are scarce people become jittery over small but delicate issues.

There is a theory that the government is the problem solver irrespective of the magnitude of the problem. People's expectation of the government is such that the latter is to provide for every one's need. This makes the people to play the role of consumers. The government is genuinely expected to provide capital for production, water, infrastructure and any other necessary amenity. Education and health services are equally the preserve of the state. The government is expected to promote common good. This is an old theory that suggests that the government cannot do wrong.¹² This theory is contrasted by the self-interest school, which holds that the government can do no right. It is always through pressure that the government would address people's plight. Citizens use political influence and pressures to get access to benefits allocated by government. Politicians use government resources to increase their hold on power; public officials trade access to government benefits for personal reward, and state use their power to get access to the property of the citizen.¹³ According to Anthony Dawns votes are the most precious jewel for politicians. They will always minimize their own welfare by selling policies for votes.¹⁴

In Kenya, the KANU government was accused of abetting corruption, which is a major impediment in the fight against poverty. According to some school of thought, the government used poverty as a political strategy for its own survival. Poor people are generally vulnerable. Since majority of voters are poor, it would require just a few shillings to get them famine relief food in exchange for their votes. Only the dead never tells tales. For political reason it would be safer to keep such people in their condition of want! Most areas are not accessible in Kenya, but come the general election, graders will be moving up and down, to prove the mighty power and good will of the ruling party in meeting the needs of the people. Poverty in Africa cannot be eradicated so long as we still have "emergency governments". Such governments only respond to crisis situations as they come and little is done to put precautionary measures in place.

A clear contrast emerges between the platonic theory and the public choice theory of the government. According to the former, it is the duty of the government to intervene and correct all distortions. It is becoming apparent, especially according to the public choice theory, that the first and most important priority of the government is not how to serve the citizen, but how to stay in power. No wonder a former US president Thomas Jefferson once asked the Americans to think of how to serve their country (government) not what their country (government) is to do for them. I want to believe that it is the government that is paid to serve the people not the other way round. The government collects taxes by every means to finance its obligations to the citizen. Taxation is enough service any government should expect from the people. All governments throughout the world would do everything possible to stay in power. Ironically, no government in the world will be willing to deliver services freely without any pressure from the citizen. The government could declare free education, free medical services, and improved infrastructures, but still the basic intention is not actually to serve but to convince the electorate that it is doing well for them. The voters should therefore consider renewing their contract with them. Politics is a game of calculation for survival. Things like compassion, charity or humanity are secondary to the basic principles of the game. It is a false dream for any citizen to imagine that one-day the government will virtually eradicate poverty. What is likely to happen is that the gap between the rich and the poor will continue to widen. War against poverty cannot be won by adopting some policies or consensus based on strategic planning. I do not mean to discredit academic approach to poverty eradication. My worry is that such an approach had been too academic for the people on the grass, the real victims of economic mismanagement. These are the people who know nothing about sitting and travelling allowances and other incidentals. Fight against poverty requires an

¹¹ Setri Nyomi page 85,(Ed) *African Christian families in the 21st century*, All Africa Conference of Churches 2000

¹² Martin N.Marger *Social Inequality Pattern and Processes* Mayfield Publishing Company London 1999

¹³ Ibid page 50

¹⁴ Ibid page 52

“*unbwogable*”¹⁵ revolution. This requires putting extreme pressure on the government to the extent that the executive won't have time to celebrate victories and drinking champagne. This is a war of individuals against the state. Why do we say this, or how can a war against poverty be a war against the state?

The state takes responsibility as the custodian of public interest. It is the state that has been entrusted with national resources to facilitate development. It is the state that has created numerous structures of oppression that are responsible for escalating poverty situation. But this war must not be completely won. It is not meant to remove the state. It would be a total anarchy to remove this necessary evil. This war must be limited enough only to force the state to make legitimate concessions. One of our strategies is to make more demand than the state can provide for.

The gap between the rich and the poor is already wide enough to raise genuine concerns. The rich in the midst of scarcity are like an island of roses in the ocean of thorns. It will really be difficult to reach the island for roses without making some major destruction here and there. But it would be wrong to suggest that the only way to eradicate poverty is to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. If this suggestion is held, then there are only two choices available. One is to empower the poor, to elevate his status by making opportunities for growth accessible to him. We may be tempted to forget the plight of the rich for the time being as we proceed enriching the poor with recourses for his personal expansion. Our responsibility will be to ensure that the poor climb the economic ladder as gently as possible to avoid the danger of falling. Legitimate and moral question will still come up. For example what should be our attitude towards the rich, those who are already on top? Do we forget about them completely? It will be the beginning of the mother of all battle if this happens. The rich know the ladder, and their corporation and good will must be carefully harnessed for this big project to succeed. The rich would also need or want to climb much higher. If both the rich and the poor were to continue and be encouraged to climb the economic ladder, and if this were to be seen as justice, then the question of bridging the gap should not arise.

The second option in bridging the gap is to reduce the capacity of the rich. This is like digging a hole to fill a hole. It would be a disastrous option. It is the rich who control power and recourse. It is only the communist dictatorship, which was bold enough to think in that direction. But if we were to agree with George Orwell¹⁶ that some animals in the farm are obviously more equal than others, then we must also accept the fact that the rich in our midst cannot be anything less. The economy will run better only when others are less! Having a landlord brings at the background the idea of a tenant even though some tenants are more economically endowed than their landlords. Life is made up of contradictions. There has to be partners, major and junior; employers and employees; poor and rich; young and old etc. Reducing the capacity of the rich as a way of bridging the gap between the rich and the poor is tantamount to promoting poverty in a big way. What I mean here is that we cannot avoid having a class society where people play different roles and exercising control over different standards of resources. The former president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere once described the neighboring Kenya as a man eat-man society. He was indeed critical of the capitalistic system of economy Kenya had adopted and seeing it as a major cause of exploitation of the less advantaged people by those in power. Every system however good it is can be subjected to abuse. Even Nyerere's own social economy was so much abused that Nyerere had to make a major retreat.

The Lutheran World Federation had made some far-reaching proposals aimed at reducing the inequality burden among her member churches. It had been proposed that one of the ways of bridging the gap between the rich north and the poor south was to increase the share of the southern representation to the top decision making organ of the Federation.

A second proposal was for member churches in all countries to ask their governments to redirect 1% of their military budget to emergency aid for drought victims in Africa. As would be expected, very few countries heeded to this call. It is very difficult for any social group religious or political to influence government policy unless extensive lobbying and pressure is exerted. It becomes apparent that for the church to succeed influencing the government, it must work out its strategy well. This would include planting its ideals in every organ of the state. The more effective way would be to *evangelize* the state. The Church must be serious enough in its evangelistic mission. Its priority must be to indoctrinate the state with emotions, spirituality, ethos, ideals, virtues and all that appertain to goodness. This is a mission that it should not feel ashamed of. However, it must at the same time be ready to meet opposition from within and without the government. Not every government would be willing to surrender its sovereignty to any other organ of society. One mistake the church must always try to avoid is to adopt the character of a pressure group. Pressure groups have very limited goal and will always die away once the goal is achieved or when the momentum is gone. But if the Church assumes its place as one of the major organs of society, then it must be seen to be pressing for this claim. It must demand what is due to it. The participation of Church in such an exercise is by all means meant to force the state, which is a symbol of power and authority to get actively involved in matters of justice. But real justice can be exercised when both the state and the citizen honour their parts of the social contract.

Karl Marx had a very radical view of how exploitative capitalism could be tamed. He and many other social theorists viewed capitalism as the root cause of imbalances, thus creating a wide gap between the rich and the poor. Marx held that after a successful anti-capitalist revolution a new but transitory state would be formed, the dictatorship of the proletariat.

This proletarian state would have a type of government that extends its tentacles into every ones business. Marxist revolution, then, does not bring in either anarchy or liberty, and in any case violent revolution for whatever cause must always be a risky policy.¹⁷

¹⁵ Unbwogable is a popular Kenyan Luo word meaning “that which cannot be shaken”. It was a word popularized by Musician Gidi Gidi Maji Maji and high jacked by the opposition politicians during their campaign to dislodge the then ruling party KANU from power. The root word *bwogo* means to scare. Unbwogable is an anglicized version referring to someone who cannot be shaken.

¹⁶ George Orwell *the animal farm*

¹⁷ Walter Harrelson *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* Fortress Press Philadelphia 1980

Professor Anyang' Nyong'o¹⁸ links poverty situation in Africa to bad governance. It is bad governance, which creates environment conducive for malpractice. Nyong'o, like all other political scientists seems to think that good governance is a prerequisite for sound economic growth since it guarantees checks and balances within its structures. Good governance would ensure that all holes of inefficiency, self-centeredness and other malpractices are properly filled and that priority values will be enhanced. Nyong'o proposes some far reaching actions that would ensure that good governance is effectively established as a tool for fighting poverty.

"Democratic values should be accepted in Africa as universal."

Nyong'o makes this suggestion against the background of intolerant political atmosphere in the continent of Africa. Most African leaders for a very long time had never accepted ideals and reality of democratic values. More often than not some assumed cultural catalogues are always put across as the African model of governance. Or so to speak, is there a democracy that is peculiar only to Africa? A biblical scholar would wish to remind us that God knew no democracy throughout the history of his special relationship with the people of Israel. He was even bitter when people started to demand a change of government, thus calling for the scraping of theocracy in order to embrace the popular monarchial system (1Samuel 8). The history of the people of Israel shows us very clearly that the efficacy of every system would depend on the commitment of the leaders and the goodwill of the citizens. The Biblical constitution provides sound basis for a people's centered approach to issues of common concern. Social contract between the people and their leaders and also among the people themselves is regulated by universally accepted value oriented principles. The biblical constitution stipulates clearly how the needy are to be taken care of. It also gives definition of the needy to be the women, children, orphans, the elderly, slaves, foreigners and those people whose economic status was appalling. I sincerely cannot see any good governance without adequate reference to these biblical values. There could be a reasonable amount of divergent views with regard to democracy, we however, cannot ignore the very fundamental convergent that surpasses all cultures. The human factor and all its strapping: the factor of justice and fairness, basic rights to food, accommodation, and clothing, the right to say something and be heard. These are some basic values that are not only the preserve of western democracies. If democracy is to be embraced wholeheartedly in Africa to enhance our capacity to fight poverty, then, it is not a western thing. It is a human thing. Therefore it is also an African thing.

Africa has never known real peace since it became a victim of foreign conquest decades ago. Independence from direct colonial power has not helped either in promoting pure "African" or what can be vaguely described as African socialism. Most African freedom fighters pledged to fight colonialism as a way of restoring freedom among the African people. In Kenya, for example, in his first state address as the new head of state, Jomo Kenyatta identified three important enemies of Africa that must be eliminated if Africa was to regain her glory in the world: ignorance; poverty; and diseases. The question now is how far did Kenyatta and his government succeed? What is clear is that Kenyatta left Kenyans more divided than ever before. His tribesmen filled almost every senior position in the government. Corruption was at its highest level. There were numerous cases of assassinations. Priority shifted radically from fighting diseases, poverty and ignorance, to fighting critics of his politics and settling his tribesmen in prime areas everywhere within the republic. The priority was centered on consolidation of power by eliminating all potential alternatives to his rule. There was no peace and by the time Kenyatta died in 1978, Kenyans were already fed up with him and by extension any possible Kikuyu presidency. In a scenario like this poverty would continue to steal the show and people continue to fight losing battles. The countries of Africa, especially Angola, DRC, the Sudan, and Somalia which had not had a government for many years since the demise of dictator Siad Barre, had been ravaged by both internally and externally fuelled wars. Enormous destruction of property and loss of human lives had been on a higher scale. South Sudan, the newest nation in the world celebrated her independence with pomp and color. There was a general feeling that the liberation from the north would yield abundance in terms of human rights, self determination, economic liberty and political rights. It was hardly three years after the declaration of independence when a rebellion emerged believed to have been orchestrated by the sacking of the vice president Dr. Riek Machar. For the first time, the new nation is forced to deal with internal rebellion that so far claimed more than 1000 lives. South Sudan depends on its neighboring states for human resource in professional areas, business, and infrastructural development. The war just took them many years back. Foreign investors were left scared and only the bold ones would be willing to invest in a country whose stability is determined by the barrel of the gun rather than acts of civility.

Nyong'o says that economic development cannot be left to chance: it must be consciously planned for and adequately financed by governments democratically put in power by the people.

Nyong'o is currently a Senator in Kenya for Kisumu County and is a renowned political scientist. Nyong'o expressed these views when he was the Minister for planning and national development in 2005. But the irony is that there is no good will for implementing their planning. When good intention is found only in the concept papers and strategic planning, and there are no mechanisms for implementation, then we would rather go by chance. Nyong'o had an uphill task in planning but sometimes he realized that he was actually reinventing the wheel. Good economic planning was done far back in the sixties but interestingly all these are found in archives! Planning seems not to exist in African blood. They like reacting to emergencies. Emergencies are easier to remember and therefore very favourable for political expediency.

¹⁸ Papers presented during an annual scientific Conference organized by the Tropical Institute for Community Development in Africa. Professor Peter Anyang Nyong'o is a political scientist and currently serving as a Senator of Kisumu County in Kenya. As a son of an Anglican Priest, Nyong'o learnt a lot from the church as a caring institution. He learnt a lot from the former Bishop Dr. John Henry Okullu. The two shared a lot in connection with advocacy for good governance.

Given the difficult international environment, African countries must enhance their bargaining power with donors, foreign governments and multilateral agencies by “putting their own house in order” through good governance.

The question, which I keep on asking, is, when will Africa ever become a donor in the real sense of the word? For how long will we continue stretching our hands for alms especially when the world economy seems to take a different dimension? By what means do African countries need to enhance their bargaining power? Even though the pace of technology has gone up and the world has become what is now commonly called global village, Africa is still lagging behind. Apart from her major cities, Africa still has an interconnectivity problem. Communication, amongst the member states is still very expensive. Africa is yet to venture into a meaningful corporation among themselves and foreign donors. Time has come for Africa to stop thinking that her future development would depend on amount of grant and loans from the North. I will discuss this topic at length in a another article. As at of now, I can only be categorical in dispelling the theory that without donor money Africa is doom. It is our own ineptitude, which has been taken advantage of by the North. So long as we are still disorganized, and so long as we are not yet ready to cultivate confidence in our own systems, we shall have no choice but to continue begging, thus accepting all the conditions imposed on us: good governance. Good governance ensures that, human and natural resources are, managed by competent team of administrators. But competence alone may not be enough. The governing authorities must ensure that there is zero tolerance to corruption. Corruption robs the state of enormous amount of revenue as individuals enrich themselves with resources, which they cannot account for. Corruption compromises efficiency, justice and fairness. It negates the principle of fair competition when every player is required to display and account for his competence.

One thing that is certain is that poor people do not have bargaining power. I would differ with Nyong’o a bit on this issue of bargaining power. Instead of using the term bargaining power, which in my mind African countries are unlikely to have, I would prefer to use the term “tactical strategy “. It is those who are endowed with intelligence who can resort to tactical strategies as means of persuading the rich hawk to drop that piece of meat from its beak. African countries should not feel ashamed of using the only ammunitions they have so long as they can work. Any method that works that can take us across to the land of plenty must be pursued. The donors are part of the global system. One of the strategies would be to encourage some of our brains to invade the west. The objective here is not to assist the west to improve their economy, or to fill some gaps in their systems. However, the only aim is to find a means of taping some resources to bring back to Africa. My intention here is not to encourage brain drain, but to find a way of reaching the wealth in the North. This is just one way. Another way is to lobby for direct investment. Foreign investment would be the most ideal for Africa. The taxpayers will not be compelled to pay debt, which does not help them directly. Money from donors had been the subject of debate. Most of it finds its way into individual accounts of the ruling thieves. What African countries need to do is to create an enabling environment conducive for such an investment. After the Second World War, Germany and Japan were left in ruin. Economically they were no countries. Germany was forcefully divided between the western bloc and eastern bloc controlled by the United States and the former USSR respectively. What the west did was to pick up the pieces and start reconstruction of their respective “new colonies”. Both direct and indirect investments were encouraged. They were totally committed to developing the two nations at all cost. Now Japan and Germany are the second and third biggest economies in the world and it is china that is pushing her up much faster than had been expected. The North should feel morally obliged to help Africa.

The effect of poverty is felt in the church both directly and indirectly. For a long time, most churches and church organizations in Africa had been depending on their counterparts in the North for financial donations. Some of the community services run by local Para-church organizations are actually receiving direct funding from foreign donors. But this is not a free gift from donors without any strings attached. The church in Africa is compelled to embrace some principles that may in the long run prove to be culturally unacceptable. The Anglican Church in Africa has been caught in a very awkward position with regard to doctrinal issues affecting the world- wide communion. Most financial assistance to the church comes from the North. But the direction that the North is taking with regard to certain practices which according to the Church in Africa is fundamentally pervert, leaves the latter in a total dilemma. Should she sever her relationship with the church in the north for the sake of spiritual purity, and in this case risk losing financial support, or should she go it alone with the assurance that the Lord will be her helper?

In their book, *Modern Christian Living*, Sharky and Welch insist that aids for developing countries is not only a matter of human solidarity, charity or love, but also of justice to put right past wrongs, for some of the wealth of the rich come from past exploitation of the poor, as in the slave trade. Those giving aid must also be careful not to do it in such a way as to humiliate those receiving it: their dignity must be protected.¹⁹

America owes her economic success to the vast population of African slaves. It is the slaves from Africa who supported the growth of the vast economic empire. Every year US gives green card visas to foreigners to the tune of fifty thousand. No country in the world would be so willing to allow such a big number of immigrants into her territory. It is these immigrants who support the American industrial sector. Generally speaking, Americans hate what they call odd jobs. But it is odd jobs, which are the bedrock of any economy. Justice would require that a powerful economy like the United State must feel morally obliged to invest in developing countries. The same labour our people provide in their industries abroad will be available in plenty here at home.

More often than not, donors tend to give the impression that they are virtually indispensable. They would therefore dictate terms and conditions for the grants they give recipient countries. In as much as they are willing to assist the developing countries in reducing the poverty level, it is apparent that their aim would not to see the poor countries becoming more independent in terms of food production and other basic services. Neocolonialism has come and presents itself in different disguises: cultural domination, economic dictates

¹⁹ Ibid

and political manipulation. The multinational corporations, The World Bank and IMF, and other foreign agencies are used as the vehicle for the extension of Western Empire. The overall aim of all forms of aid should be to help the recipient nations to help themselves by developing their own resources. In cases of emergency they may need material aid, machines, medicine, temporary housing, food, but dependence on external sources for food, for example, in normal times is an intolerable situation for the country concerned. There is no more urgent task than that of helping those countries, which need to develop their food production potential to do so.²⁰

There had been an attempt to directly link food shortage in Africa with population control. Intensive campaign had been mounted mostly in the eighties and mid nineties to convince African and other developing nations to control their population growth as one of the ways off addressing food deficit. The idea here is to identify poverty with inadequate food supply. Food deficit is the worst problem poor nation's face. In view of this, and any development that does not focus on food production will be of no use. However, statistics show that we have more bread eaters than breadwinners and this causes a very devastating imbalance between production and consumption rates. Increased food production and the development of industries and trade are the keys to a better life for the poorer nations. Population control may not be the magical cure for poverty or by extension food shortage. Some other factors must be brought on board for a more rigorous scrutiny. Population growth could only be seen as an indicator. Several factors affect it-adequate resources of food and other requirements of a decent existence, a stable social order free of wars and serious internal disturbance, and an ability to prevent or control drought, flood and natural disasters.²¹

Today the worst scenario is how to protect the population from total collapse following the escalation of HIV/AIDS epidemic. The scourge to an alarming level adversely affects most poor countries to the extent that most countries have declared the scourge a national disaster. It is now an open secret that most governments have lessened the campaign against birth control for married couples. Most hospitals now have 70% of their bed occupancy for AIDS victims! Seven hundred or more Kenyans used to die every day of HIV/AIDS related cases. The scourge has affected recruitment to the forces since most potential candidates are proven cases. Those who are still lucky to be "fresh" are quietly encouraged to give birth in big numbers. The free availability of ARV drugs has created a new life and un-researched theory has it that many people with HIV have now managed to live much longer as they spread the virus to unsuspecting people as well!

The irony is that the escalating AIDS pandemic is directly linked to poverty situation. The poor are vulnerable. Most poor people who are infected with HIV/AIDS dies much faster because of inadequate medical and home based care. Most families cannot afford the necessary food nutrients and medication to prolong their life.

Brewster Kneen, an expert in food system writes "I might like or want to believe in the talk of saving lives, curing disease, and feeding the hungry." But in examining the subject and putting it in context, its attitude of conquest and control by means of threatening and administering death become too obvious. It is death to microorganisms, death to larger pests of both plant and animal varieties, death to human diseases, human communities, and even whole cultures.²² Kneen sounds alarm with regard to popular preference given to biotechnology. Domination of science in food production can have a far-reaching consequence if it was not adequately monitored and the likely outcome preempted. Biotechnology is the application of biochemistry, microbiology and process technology with the objective of turning to technical use the potential of microorganisms and cell and tissue cultures as well as parts thereof.²³ The question is, to what extent should we embrace biotechnology as a means to solving our food problem? The best approach to this question may not be our preserve, but it must be looked at from the overall effect it has on human life and the life of the environment as a whole. Life in its entirety is neither the preserve of biology nor physiology. Moral, social and political considerations as well as collective and individual conscience must be taken into account. The latter considerations already create a scenario for us with regard to balancing our collective egos and reality of life vis- a- vi evidence of science. Nelson Rockefeller and the Rockefeller Foundation were also the primary architects of the global strategy to solve the larger problem of "underdevelopment" by increasing food production so that the targeted countries could become exporters and trading partners for the free world and provide opportunities for investment.²⁴

Priority in Africa has not taken into account fundamental principles required in food production as one of the major factors affecting poverty level in Africa. There is no country that can confidently claim sovereignty if it cannot feed its people. Political independence has been challenged by several factors, and it is no longer a sufficient means to achieving desired objectives.

²⁰ WCC *Your kingdom Come report on World Conference on mission & Evangelism* Melborn 12th – 25th May, 1980

²¹ Louis Putterman Bietrich Rueschemeger Lynne Rienner publishers London 1992

²² Merilee S Grindle & John W Thomas – *Public Choices & Policy Change: The political Economy of Reform in Dev. Countries* – Baltimore : Johns Hopkins Unit – 11917

²³ Antony Downs *An Economic Thesis of Democracy* NY – Harper & Row – 1957

²⁴ Jenny Teichman Kartherine C Evans *Philosophy for beginners* page 101– a Belgium Guide Blackwell Oxford 1992

7. Conclusion

As I conclude, it is imperative to take cognizance of the vital reality of core values we need to embrace in our culture. There is a proliferation of cultures and systems which now cut across the global network. The *indignifying* life of *want* and the prevalence of cultural captivity to systems and life styles which no longer add any value must be comprehensively addressed at every level. The education system in Africa must incorporate programs for food security, positive thinking towards work, (work ethics) and resource management, cultural studies for social transformation, and good governance practice.

Religious institutions must take the challenge and spiritually and socially integrate their teachings with the prevailing social dynamics as a way of enlightening their adherents with new knowledge and thinking. There has been a lot that the society had achieved as a result of missionary intervention. If whitewashing can make people change for the better, then it is a good thing to whitewash many people who still believe that eating in funerals is an act of grace. Such behaviors were actually planted by Christian evangelicals, the revival group. It is this group of Christians who started the culture of cooking at funerals of their colleagues and giving speeches in praise of their departed colleague. This was never an African habit. When people slowly realized that this was a good practice, it was adopted and became part of our culture! People used to be buried the Muslim style. No time for body preservation in morgues. There are certain practices which can be dealt with through education whereas some through legislation. This is not for this article for now.

At a high level, governments must be forced to budget for poverty reduction through the creation of job opportunities for the young people. Decentralization of job related opportunities would help ordinary people minimize the cost of looking for jobs in major towns. Affordable housing schemes should be made possible for the most vulnerable. Decentralized infrastructural facilities should be made accessible to all the people. The government only needs to suspend some of its recurrent expenditure by scaling down some unnecessary budgetary allocations. There is a lot that national governments can save, that can be used to redress poverty situation. Some of the practical measures include but not limited to cutting down on military budget, unnecessary foreign trips, putting monitoring systems to check on malpractices in its ranks and files, creating healthy environment for doing business, funding creativity, and providing mechanism for addressing pervert practices.

Churches and mosques also must come up with programs that would enhance the economic capacity of their adherents. People are likely to believe their pastors and imams more than government officials or politicians. This is a strength that they must exploit to educate the people to realize their own potential to move forward. Positive attitude towards creation of wealth and its proper use must be cultivated and preached to everyone who dares to listen.

8. Acknowledgment

I wish to thank my colleagues in my department for their useful critique of the views I have expressed in this paper. My students who helped me with the research need a special tribute. It is not easy to get certain facts right especially when people become suspicious of your intention. I also want to thank my librarian for helping me make the right selection of reading materials for reference.

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