

'It's on the Old Mat that One Weaves the New One': The Dialogue between African Proverbs and Biblical Texts

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ABSTRACT

The article takes as point of departure that meaningful dialogue is a possibility only where there is difference (or distance) and the possibility of connections. From this point of departure the possibility of dialogue between African proverbs and biblical texts are explored. The narrative metaphor, as used in narrative theology and narrative therapy, is used to emphasize the possibility and importance of such dialogue. With reference to a number of African proverbs and biblical texts, the article then attempts to show that such dialogue bears witness to a rather complex relationship between African proverbs and biblical texts.

A INTRODUCTION

The proverb in the title of my paper refers to two mats: an old mat and a new one. But there seems to be an ambiguity in this proverb. 'On the old mat' could refer to the location where the person who is weaving the new mat sits. If so, the old mat functions as an appropriate and comfortable place for the challenging task of weaving a new mat. However, 'on the old mat' could also mean that the old mat is used as a model according to which the new one is woven. In this case the old mat provides patterns that may be copied, or modified, or replaced with different patterns. Whichever way one pictures the life setting of this proverb, both mats are valued, and the old mat has an *enabling* function as far as the weaving of the new one is concerned. The old mat provides a proper context for the process of weaving a new one, and it may influence the characteristics of the new one.

The images of an old and a new mat may open up fresh ways of thinking about the dialogue between indigenous African wisdom texts and biblical texts. The perceived gap between African culture and the Western packaging of the Christian gospel necessitates reflection on the possibility of meaningful and enriching dialogue between facets of African culture and biblical texts. True dialogue does not flourish in either/or situations. Dialogue takes place where

there is difference (or distance) *and* the possibility of connections, as the images of the two mats suggest. Wisdom, which is characterized by its 'international' appeal, might be a good starting point for dialogue. Wisdom traditions are aimed at recognizing and apprehending the realities of life as they were actually experienced. Its focus is on the kinds of experiences that people across times and cultures have. In fact, in wisdom traditions it is not uncommon to borrow from the wisdom material of others. For example, in the book of Proverbs considerable Egyptian influence is visible in the collection found in Proverbs 22:17-24:22, which resembles the *Instruction of Amenemopet*. Wisdom, therefore, is characterized by the possibility of connections amidst differences, which is important for real dialogue to take place. From this point of departure I would like to explore some aspects of possible dialogue between African wisdom – African proverbs in particular – and biblical texts, both of which may be regarded as classical texts.

My first real exposure to (the study of) African proverbs was during a working consultation on 'African proverbs and Christian missions' near Maputo in 1995. This consultation was sponsored by the African Proverbs Project. There I started to appreciate the beauty, wisdom, power, and communication potential of African proverbs. But then certain questions entered my mind: What will African people think when I start using some of their beautiful proverbs, since I am very much a fresher as far as African culture is concerned? My situation reminded me of two African proverbs:

When foreigners [your enemy] dance your dance they just push out their buttocks (Ganda, Uganda) (Opoku 1997:80).

I pointed out to you the stars (moon) and all you saw was the tip of my finger (Sukuma, Tanzania) (Healey & Sybertz 1996:17).

Furthermore, could I engage in dialogue between African proverbs and biblical texts without doing an injustice to either the Bible, or African culture, or both? During a personal discussion, Prof John Mbiti made the reassuring remark that no African is an expert on all African proverbs, and not all Africans are experts on the Bible. So to some extent Africans find themselves in a position similar to mine.

But still more questions occupied my mind: For what purpose would one attempt to get African proverbs and biblical texts 'talking' to each other? Can it be more than merely an interesting and creative exercise? The more I studied proverbs, and the more I saw such dialogue in action in real life situations, the more excited I became about the value of such an endeavour. A number of world proverbs show that the link between the divine and proverbs has been made elsewhere. They describe proverbs as *little gospels* (Spanish), or *the voice of God* (Japanese), or the *drum of God* (Punjabi) (Basgöz 1990:9). In

Sirach 6:35 we also read:

*Be ready to listen to every godly discourse,
and let no wise proverbs escape you.*

B A NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK

I have been intrigued by how people in diverse contexts have been using the narrative metaphor to speak about matters that are relevant to missionary situations in general, and the dialogue between African culture and the Christian faith in particular. In the following two examples the narrative metaphor seems to imply that this dialogue is very important indeed.

- First, two missionaries in Tanzania have emphasized the use of African oral literature, especially proverbs, in an effort to contribute to an African *narrative theology*.
- Second, it seems that certain basic assumptions and attitudes of *narrative therapy* overlap with those of missionary work. And exactly these assumptions and attitudes necessitate the dialogue between African culture and the Christian faith.

1 An African narrative theology

In their book titled *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz (missionaries in Tanzania) used the narrative metaphor to justify their emphasis on enculturation theology in Africa, and to explain why the oral literature of Africans should be a dialogue partner in an enculturation theology. According to them the dialogue between African oral literature and biblical texts is part of '[...] an on-going African journey of inculturation and contextualization — rooting the gospel in local African cultures and societies. The guides on this journey are African proverbs, sayings, riddles, stories [...]'. (Healey & Sybertz 1996:13)

Healey and Sybertz underline the difference between Africanizing Christianity and Christianizing Africa. It is not a matter of taking the traditional customs of African culture and making the best ones to fit onto Christianity. It is also not a matter of African cultural values being mediated through Western culture and thought patterns. Rather, it is to start from the reality of the African context and see how the story of the gospel can become a leaven to it (cf. Healey & Sybertz 1996:19). This dynamic implies an active dialogue between the gospel and African culture. True dialogue involves a mutual two-way challenge and enrichment. The African culture challenges the Christian faith to be truly universal. This means being faithful to the gospel as 'good news' to all people and all cultures. At the same time the Christian faith challenges and illuminates African culture and traditions.

To them, the narrative metaphor does not only suggest that people live and understand their lives through 'stories', but also that the oral literature of a culture, especially proverbs and stories, will feature prominently in the dialogue between African culture and the Christian faith. They quote Kalilombe, who explains why African proverbs play such a crucial role in this dialogue:

Proverbs are a mirror in which a community can look at itself and a stage on which it exposes itself to others. They describe its values, aspirations, preoccupations and the particular angles from which it sees and appreciates realities and behaviour. What we call mentality or way of life is best pictured in them (Healey & Sybertz 1996:35).

2 Basic assumptions of narrative therapy

Narrative therapy is sometimes known as involving 're-authoring' or 're-storying' conversations. As these descriptions suggest, stories are central to an understanding of narrative ways of working in a therapeutic context. As human beings, we are interpreting beings. We seek to make our experiences of daily events meaningful. The stories we have about our lives are created through linking certain events together in a particular sequence across a time period, and finding a way of explaining or making sense of them (cf. Morgan 2000:5). We all are multi-storied in the sense that we have many stories about our lives and relationships occurring simultaneously. No single story can encapsulate or handle all the contingencies of life. Certain stories are dominant in a person's life, while others are alternative stories. There are stories about the past, present and future. The past and the future are not that-which-is-no-more and that-which-is-not-yet respectively. The past and the future can be seen as extensions of the present. The past is the still-present and the future is the already-present (cf. Niebuhr 1963:92). We live in the tension-filled and powerful now. When I tell a story from my past, I am actually construing my future.

An important insight of narrative therapy is that human distress can be described as a story of which the flow is blocked: the past cannot flow through the present toward an imagined future (cf. Müller 2000:8,12). Walter Brueggemann (cf. Müller 2000:13) described the Christian life as 'telling a past and dreaming a future.' When telling a past and dreaming a future do not connect with experiences in the present, we struggle to live authentic lives. Re-storying becomes necessary when a person struggles to make these connections between past, present and future. Already available experiences often provide an 'opening' for an alternative story to take shape.

The above basic assumptions of narrative therapy elicit certain questions regarding missionary situations: Can the gospel be seen as an invitation to become part of an alternative story? To which story/stories is the gospel an

alternative? Is one of the purposes of an enculturation theology perhaps to nurture the connection between the past story (being an African) and the present experience of the gospel (being a Christian) in order to become authentic African Christians? Which past stories are African Christians allowed to tell? Can certain brands of Christianity become dominant stories that prevent Africans from telling their past and dreaming their future, and for which alternative stories need to be developed? Can African proverbs fulfil the role of already available experiences that provide 'openings' for alternative stories to take shape? It seems also the therapeutic application of the narrative metaphor invites reflection on the dialogue between African proverbs and biblical texts.

C POSSIBLE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN AFRICAN PROVERBS AND BIBLE TEXTS

Dialogue is not only about similarities or differences in wording, imagery, content, and so forth. These features are inherent to the proverbs and Bible texts themselves. But a *person* uses a proverb, and/or Bible text *in a particular situation*. The mere juxtaposition of Bible texts and African proverbs already elicits a proverb 'meaning', and therefore creates space for dialogue, but this dialogue only comes to life in real-life situations.

The impact of the dialogue will be affected by the interests and aims of the user of a proverb and/or Bible text (rhetorical matters). People's interests and aims, and the possible situations in which proverbs and Bible texts can be used, vary to such a degree that any effort to represent them in lists like the one below will amount to reductionism. For this reason, the categories I have created mainly reflect the different kinds of interplay between features inherent to the proverbs and Bible texts themselves.

1 African proverbs and biblical texts affirm each other

a An African proverb and a biblical text have (almost) identical wording

- People do not build a house on top of water. (Lugbara, Uganda)
And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act in them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. (Matthew 7:26-27)
- What must be nursed is the person who is ill and not the lying down. (Shona)
When Jesus heard this, he said to them: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Mark 2:17)
- The heart is diligent, but the body is weak. (Sesotho)
Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. (Mark 14:38)

- The one who loves is not afraid. (Swahili, East Africa)
There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. (1 John 4:18)
For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and love and self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:7)
- b An African proverb and a biblical text have matching ideas or motifs**
- One returns to the ruins, but one does not return to the womb. (Setswana: Lesotho, South Africa)
Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' (John 3:4)
- Oh salt! For your own sake, be tasty, or they will say 'A stone!' and throw you away. (Oromo)
You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. (Matthew 5:13)
- He is so clean, a fly would not sit on him. (Zulu, South Africa)
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. (Psalm 51:7)
Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord; though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (Isaiah 1:18)
- When God picks up a stone, God does not throw it at once. (Akan, Ghana)
That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. (Jonah 4:2)
- The dog, not seeing its own back end, says to the goat, "Hold your tail down!" (Oromo, Ethiopia)
And
The polecat is not aware of its smell. (Xhosa, South Africa)
And
The dry skull laughs at the one which is fresh. (Gusii, Kenya)
Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? (Mt 7:3)
- Do not look at the visitor's face but at his stomach. (Tonga, Zambia)
If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, it has not works, is dead. (James 2:15-17)

c An African proverb illustrates a biblical passage

- Let the elephant fell the tress, let the bushpig dig the holes, let the mason wasp fill the walls, let the giraffe put up the roof, then we'll have a house. (Zaire)

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth [...] For we are God's servants, working together [...]. (1 Corinthians 3:5-7, 9)

- Do not leave out the thumb when tying a knot. (Ga, Ghana)
The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. (1 Corinthians 12:21-22)
- The groin pains in sympathy with the sore. (Zulu, South Africa)
A friend lives at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity. (Proverbs 17:17)
But as for me, when they were sick, I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting. (Psalm 35:13-14)
- The axe forgets but the tree cannot forget. (Zimbabwe)
By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion [...] If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Psalm 137:1, 5-6)
- The dog that eats at two houses will be eaten in between by a hyena. (Oromo, Ethiopia)
No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matthew 6:24)

d A biblical passage illustrates an African proverb

- If God gives something, he gives life with it. (Burundi)
And
If the earth does not give birth to grass and grain we die. (Sudan)
And
The mouth eats because of God and the clouds. (Oromo, Ethiopia)
(Cf. the creation narrative of Genesis 1)
- You cannot escape God. You will meet him in foreign lands. (Namibia)
And
The springhare said: 'I can run away fast!' But the desert said: 'I am too wide,' (Setswana, Botswana, South Africa)
(Cf. the Jonah narrative)

- One does not have to wear shoes to show bravery. (Sesotho: Lesotho, South Africa)
(*Cf. the story of David and Goliath, especially 1 Samuel 17:38-39, 45-46, 48-49*)

2 African proverbs and biblical texts extend each other

a An African proverb extends a biblical text

The following two proverbs extend the biblical text from a gender point of view.

- Who loves the mother must love the child too. (Bemba, Zambia)
Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves the child. (1 John 5:1) (Some Bible translations, for example the New Revised Standard Version, read 'parent' instead of 'father' to the same effect.)
- No mother can throw away her child even though the child is covered with boils. (Zaire)
So he [the prodigal son who admitted that he had sinned against heaven and before his father] set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. (Luke 15:20)

b A biblical text extends an African proverb

- A cow cannot be spared instead of a man. (Sesotho: Lesotho, South Africa)
(A fine must be paid to get a person out of trouble.)
For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16; cf. Romans 3:23-26)

3 African proverbs and biblical texts contradict each other

Sometimes a proverb and a biblical text contradict each other. The following two examples are about favouritism and fatalism respectively:

- The antelope's back does not get wet. (Dangme)
(The evil doings of an elder or important personality do not easily leak out.)
And
One who farms by the path does not plough a crooked farm. (Dangme)
(A wealthy person is never guilty)
While the Bible supports respect for the elderly and the noble (1 Timothy 5:1-2; 1 Peter 2:17), it disapproves of discrimination and favoritism. Instead, it teaches fair, just and equal treatment for all. (Acts 10:34;

James 2:1-13).

- There is always blood in the head of a tsetse fly. (Ga)
(This proverb can be used to caution people when dealing with a person known to have done some evil. This caution has been taken to suggest that people can never change from bad to good: once bad, always bad)
The Bible has shown this view to be mistaken, for:
If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

4 African proverbs use or comment on the Bible

a An African proverb comments specifically on the Bible

- He who does not believe what the elders say, will not believe the sayings of the Book (the Bible); and he who does not believe the sayings of the Book will not believe what the Lord says. (Kanuri, West Africa)

b An African proverb is based on a biblical text/motif

- He has a stick, but he is not Moses. (Swahili, East Africa)
(*Stick of Moses*: Exodus 9:23; 10:13; 14:16; 17:5-6)
- The paradise of the poor man is the home of his father-in-law. (Sukuma, Tanzania)
(*Paradise motif*: Luke 23:43)
- The priest with whom God was angry sold his prayer book and bought a donkey. (Oromo, Ethiopia)
(The person who has fallen from a high position because of the Lord's wrath.)
(*Motif of a priest with whom God was angry*: Amos 7:10-17)

5 African proverbs and biblical texts share literary features

A proverb and a biblical text may share the same stylistic features that pose certain interpretive challenges, for example the literary use of paradox.

- The hare says: Walking slowly leads to death. The chameleon says: 'Walking quickly leads to death.' (Ewe)
Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself.
Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes. (Proverbs 26:4-5)

6 African proverbs comment on situations (similar to those) in which the Bible is often used

Many proverbs comment on the kind of situation in which the Bible is often used (e.g. missionary situations).

- The old woman looks after the child to grow its teeth and the young one in turn looks after the old woman when she loses her teeth. (Akan, Ghana) (This proverb has been used to point out that the 'daughter churches' of Africa at this point in time can offer the ailing 'mother churches' of Europe support and advice.)
- A person jumps into a discussion or a situation with his/her long, uncombed hair. (Sesotho: Lesotho, South Africa) (This proverb can be used with reference to the insensitive ways in which people sometimes confront others with the gospel.)
- The horns which are stuck on do not grow. (Sesotho: Lesotho, South Africa) (When the message of the Bible is communicated from a purely Western perspective, it will not take root in Africa.)

D CONCLUSIONS

Our brief encounter with African proverbs and Bible texts above, has shown that true dialogue between these two exponents of classical texts is possible and enriching. Such dialogue is possible when African wisdom and Bible texts are used to affirm or extend each other, but also to confront each other. Shall we conclude this paper with an image that has been used regularly to describe the relationship between African culture and the Christian faith? It is the image of food. Mugambi (in Getui et al 2001:15-17) said the Gospel may be compared with salt for flavouring and seasoning for food, and with light for illuminating the world. Salt dissolves in food, and light illuminates a room. Both give quality to existence, without losing essence. Healey and Sybertz (1996:20) agree:

The encounter of African culture with Christianity brings a newness, a freshness, an originality, a difference like a spice that brings a new taste to food. In one way it is the same food (core Christianity), but it tastes very different.

For Mugambi African culture is the food, and the Christian gospel is the salt. For Healey and Sybertz African culture is the spice and Christianity is the food. True dialogue would mean that both are correct. Culture indeed "shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ" (Mbiti 1995:1) when it has transforming effects on culture.

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