

The Importance of Recognising Zulu Customs and Values Consistent with Biblical Principles in African Missional Approaches

Maniraj Sukdaven, Senior Lecturer, University of Pretoria and Hebert Ndhlovu, Solusi University, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Abstract

This paper is a study of the importance of recognising customs and values in missionary endeavors with reference to Southern African Zulu (hereafter referred to as Zulu) customs and values. The objective was to determine how embracing Zulu customs and values contribute to missionary endeavors. The study also sought to investigate how employing Zulu customs and values as bridges can bring Christianity in harmony with Zulu culture. A wide range of books and other sources, primarily on African traditional religion were consulted. Apart from books, a review of the Bible on the importance of recognising customs and values in missionary endeavors was attempted. The findings showed that Zulu customs and values consistent with biblical principles enhance missionary endeavors. It was also found that Zulu customs and values consistent with biblical principles contribute towards promoting Christianity among African people and can nurture them spiritually. This study motivated and prepared gospel workers to focus on future missionary endeavors. Based on the study, it is recommended that customs and values consistent with biblical principles be embraced into missionary endeavors. Klaus Fiedler argues, "African is what is relevant for Africans," of whatever origin a value or practice may be.

1. Introduction

One of the leading 20th century African theologians began his book by asserting that "Africans are notoriously religious" (Mbiti 1969:2). Religion is a way of life in traditional Africa. Good or bad conduct may be informed by religion. As Christian workers, it is vitally important for us to understand African customs and values because it is the basis of numerous cultural beliefs and practices which can enhance missionary endeavors among the African people.

The intention of the article is attempting to explore predominantly selected South African Zulu customs and values which are consistent with biblical principles with a view of coming up with possible bridges that enable African people to appreciate Christianity within the context

of Africa. This article further intends to employ selected Zulu customs and values as bridges that can bring Christianity in harmony with African culture. The intention is not to address missiological concepts such as inculturation, enculturation contextualisation and so forth, but to present similarities between Christianity and African Zulu cultures which the Christian missionary can be exposed to for the purposes of bridging the gap between Christianity and African culture. Klaus Fiedler (cited by Hoschele (2008:350) argues that, "African is what is relevant for Africans, of whatever origin a value or practice may be". Writing from an inculturation perspective Kuene (2012:1) suggests that:

there are specific aspects of African culture and tradition that clearly illuminate scripture and can be useful to biblical interpretation without uprooting the African from his/her context as an African. To reject African culture and tradition as pagan and unbiblical, as did the early missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa is to throw away the baby with the bath water. There is no need for Africans to be stripped of their identity before they can be Christians.

Of key importance is the need for Africa to have a breed of theologians that will reasonably redefine African theology.

2. A Succinct Overview of Zulu Customs and Values

In its belief system, African culture has customs and values which may be used to promote Christianity among African people. Within its system, Zulu culture encompasses customs and values like Ubuntu, respect for elders, love for community and solidarity, parents - child relationships, fellowship, hospitality, sense of the sacred and many others. It is unfortunate that mass media and other modernizing forces seem to be successful in eroding the good that African culture had advocated. First, markers such as innocence and authority have vanished. Taboos are gone, and nothing remains to restrain evil impulses in human beings. Rather, bad elements from alien cultures are quickly embraced by Africans. Nevertheless, African customs and values consistent with biblical principles could be significant in contributing to missionary endeavors. Thus, the discussion below focuses on several African customs and values that should be incorporated in evangelism for the church to be successful in missionary endeavors within Africa.

3. Ubuntu

Biblically the spirit of Ubuntu is implied in Acts 2. Luke writes: “And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.” (Ac 2:44-45). Kuene (2012:1) defines Ubuntu as “the essence of being human. It describes a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony, hospitality, respect, and responsiveness that individuals and groups display for one another.” In African culture today there is a cry at the disappearance of Ubuntu (Zulu/Ndebele expression for being human) or *hunhu* (Shona expression for the same). Ubuntu or *hunhu* are expressions that really cannot be translated into English. These rich expressions entail a view of life with a deep respect for people, and conditions that make life possible. In the words of du Toit (1998:49), it emphasized a spirituality of belonging to the community and to the soil itself. In the words of Desmond Tutu, “A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self- assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed” (Tutu 2008). The understanding of Ubuntu by Tutu is that people with Ubuntu have strong feelings of sacrificing for the sake of others.

For Christianity to be quite attractive to Africans, it would be proper that it provides for this full expression of being human. It is plausible that African Instituted Churches (hereafter AIC) have embraced Ubuntu and other African customs and values and are successful in reaching to the core of African culture. Unfortunately, mainline churches permit doctrinally deviant movements to have an upper hand in meeting human felt needs and, in the process, fail to appeal to the longings of the African soul.

Therefore, the Christian need not find the concept of Ubuntu as a strange practice as this is also found in the Bible and needs to be presented and practiced as such among the African.

4. Solidarity

The Bible presents spirited arguments in favor of solidarity. The best that clearly advocates for solidarity is: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gl 3:28). “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united the same mind and the same judgment” (1Cor 1:10).

It has been observed that Africans are looking for a church home where they can experience solidarity with their fellow church members as family members. Mbiti (1969:108,109) recognized the importance of solidarity in Africa. Hence, and as such mentions that, “The individual can only say: ‘I am because we are; and since we are therefore I am’”. Writing from a missiological perspective Okoye (1997:474) makes a valid point: “African solidarity, love for community, and respect for the aged as the most honored members of the family could be significant contribution” by Africans to the world. By employing this value system Christian workers in Africa could help the maturing church in Africa internalize Christian values of love and care for other human beings.

5. Sense of Respect for Elders

Peter summarizes the Bible’s teaching on respect in his first epistle: “Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king” (1Pt 2:17). The importance of respect in the Bible is further seen in the following passages: Mt 7:12; 1 Pt 2:17; Rm 12:10.

Africans also are generally admired for a strong sense of respect for those in authority and elders. According to Conton (1966:21), “Africans generally have deep and ingrained respect for old age, and even when we can find nothing to admire in an old man, we will not easily forget that his grey hairs have earned him right to courtesy and politeness”

The reason why African shows so much respect to the elderly is because they are considered to be the custodian of custom and tradition. It is interesting that the care of the aged in Africa is within the family. There are no nursing homes for the aged in Africa like in Europe and America since the elderly are cared for within the family. Parents and elderly are respected and cherished and the young ones are told to care for them. In the words of the Zulu proverb, “*ukuzala yikuzelula amathambo*” meaning to be a parent is to care and stretch yourself in your old age.

Africans also use poems to teach young people good behavior. Consider the practical example containing the moral effect of the elders’ words shared by Matei (1977:15): “In our little village when elders are around, boys must not look at girls and girls must not look at boys because the elders say, that is not good.” Thus, Africans can employ the sense of respect for the elderly to promote Christianity which also subscribes to the same virtue.

6. Humility

Humility is expected and expressed in many ways in Africa. African people openly and unashamedly show humility to the elderly, parents, husbands and wives and mostly to God. Men remove hats when greeting elderly folks and hold the right arm with the left hand when greeting those of age. Children kneel and thank parents by mentioning their maiden name after eating. Children offer a seat to an elderly person on a bus. Africans totally depend on God that they fully commit everything to Him. Thus, in their humility and in their dependence upon God, African people are able to be a powerful witness.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that humility is a Christian virtue enjoying affirmation from both the Old and New Testament. The biblical characters of Moses are an example. In the Old Testament, a splendid character reference for Moses is given by God Himself, “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth” (Nm 12:3). In the New Testament Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29). Now, this was not written by a relative or someone trying to make Moses and Jesus’ resumè look good so they could get a job. This is God talking about his servants.

Surprisingly, one important and often lacking in value, yet guaranteeing success in the mission field, is humility. It should be the default mode for everyone entering into missions, and especially for those directing missionary endeavors. Though humility at times is associated with weakness, studies reveal that humble missionaries are not threatened by others’ views and suggestions (Hibbert 2014:170-171). White (1977:9) maintains:

There is little that any of you can do alone. Two or more are better than one, if there will be that humility that you will esteem each other better than yourselves. If any of you consider your plans and modes of labor perfect, you greatly deceive yourselves. Counsel together with much prayer and humbleness of mind, willing to be entreated and advised.

To show the importance of humility by those involved in missionary endeavors, Elmer (2006:23) presents Christ as a meek servant. By employing the metaphors of a robe and towel, he explains that meekness, and not weakness, was exhibited when Christ put on a towel to wipe His disciples’ feet. Christ’ action is ideal in missionary endeavors.

7. Music as a Family Therapy and Bond

There are several accounts in the Bible which provide the strongest argument in favor of music both as a therapy and a bond. Here are some examples:

In 1 Sm 16:23, the Bible records “And whenever the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand; so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him.” Again the power of music is revealed in 2Ki 3:15. Elisha requests: “But now bring me a minstrel.” And when the minstrel played, the power of the LORD came upon him.” In both cases, the music was used to effect healing and bond.

Studies further reveal that music is among the things that family life therapists recommend for keeping families together. Parcutt (2009:120-121) stated that, “One of music’s many functions is to bring people together and give them a common identity which evidently helps social groups to function efficiently”. This view is true because there are songs that African families sing during family togetherness ceremonies.

These could either be religious or social. Once a year an African family will gather to appease the spirits, (*umthethelo*) where songs are sung, which invite those spirits to manifest themselves through some of the possessed family members. It appears that music has many functions among Shona people, some of which are, as Webber (1982:213) pointed out, used to summon the spirits to relay a particular messages to the community; either by word of mouth or instruments and also to instill moral values to the children and the community at large. Music was also used to communicate current affairs, to recall history and to sing praises to the kings and powers that be. African cultures share a lot of commonalities, which means that what can be observed in the Shona culture seems to also be the trend in other families and people of Africa.

8. The Sacredness of Life

The sacredness of life is categorically stated in the Bible where God orders Christians never to murder. Moses counsels: “You shall not kill” (Ex 20:13). In the Hebrew mindset, this means you shall promote life because it is sacred. Later in the New Testament, Jesus gave this instruction for lifestyle living: “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill, and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (Mt 5:21-22). By this instruction, Jesus equated anger with

death. Since life must be promoted, an element of anger that may result in killing a person must never be entertained.

From an African perspective, the shedding of human blood is abhorred. People who were killed were those whose continued existence was a threat to the life of others and to the peace of the community. In such cases, the principle that it is better for one to die than for the whole community to perish, Idowu (1980:65). War was only engaged in as a last resort after all formal and normal courses of action to search for peace had failed. Murder was not encouraged, especially within the clan. If a man consciously killed another man within the community, he, in turn, was killed. But if he killed a kinsman inadvertently, he was exiled for some long period.

Furthermore, the sacredness associated with life goes on to explain the rigidity with which the African treat and regard sexual intercourse and the sex organs. In fact, sex taboos and the demand for virgins before marriage stems from the fact of how Africans view sacredness of life. Speaking about the sanctity of life, Amadi (1982:58) makes this valid point: “The blood of virginity is the symbol that life has been preserved, that the spring of life has not already been flowing wastefully, and that both the girl and her relatives have preserved that sanctity of human reproduction”.

African values life more than anything else. This idea of the sanctity of life makes it an abomination for anyone, under any circumstances to take his own life. Suicide was never permitted. Punishment for suicide was such that the body was not buried since such a corpse was believed to be abominable to mother earth. Thus if this African custom was embraced as explained, there might have been a major difference. Traditional Africans and other people groups would have seen the church as a place for hope because its theology makes sense to them since it upholds the sanctity of life.

9. Parents-child Relationships

There is a striking relationship between how parents and children related in the Bible and African culture. Viewed closely, we are of the opinion that African culture and parents-child relationships are proven to be closer to the biblical injunction than the Euro-western cultures. The African parents-child relationships concept is based on Eph 6:1-3.

This passage enjoins children to obey (*hupakouete*) in Eph 6:1 as opposed to the ‘submission’ (*hupotassomenoi*) in Eph 5:21-22 which is given to wives to submit to their husbands. The *hupokouete* is imperative in the

form while *hupotassomenoi* is a participle in the passive. In strong terms, this suggests that the injunction to wives to submit to their husbands is lighter than the command for children to obey their parents. In Dt 5:16 the word ‘honor’ is also in the imperative mood. In all his words Paul seems to be saying that the parents deserve ‘double honor.’ The ‘double honor’ is because parents give children reasonable and loving boundaries in the form of rules. This is done to promote obedience over disobedience which is undesirable. Nichol also asserts that disobedience to parents ‘is treated as one of the greatest evils’ (Nichol 1980:1039). Since obedience to parents is the desired outcome, it is expected of children to show appreciation to their parents for their upbringing by reciprocating through their obedience to their parents. Paul is correct to instruct children to obey their parents because there is no other way of being grateful to them.

There are blessings for honoring parents. Paul expresses that the command to obey parents is the first commandment (*en eppangelia*) literally with a promise. The promise has two precious rewards. Firstly, that all children who obey and honor their parents are promised that it will be well with them. This could translate into success at school, success in marriage, success at work, of their offspring and success in all facets of life. To all those who do not forget their parents, they are opening for themselves a way of success.

Secondly, the command also promises longevity. In this children may be blessed to grow into ripe old age just by obeying parents. The author also strongly believes that blessings of obedience may even spill over to their posterity so that some people may actually be blessed because of how much their parent also obeyed their own parents.

Therefore African parents-child relationships concept shows how believing children can win their non-Christian parents through performing their God-ordained duty of obedience to parents and vice versa. The challenge from this article is for the church to be an advocate in the community for the rights of parents. This may include advocacy workshops in the community for the care of the aged. Setting up support groups for the neglected parents, or children, counseling for the abused and battered can be an evangelistic strategy in the community. It would be well if the church took a deliberate plan to be an education center for all positive African customs and values to the children. This includes lessons in the youth department on childhood, puberty, and marriage. This may not necessarily be only for believing children only but must include the community. If

the African church can recognize the importance of African parent-child relationships, we may win more souls by being relevant and desist from sermonizing alone.

10. Sense of Community

One of the clearest Old Testament texts which demonstrate the evidence of a sense of community is Psalms 133:1: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity." In this psalm, David affirms the power of community consciousness among the Israelites when they gathered in Jerusalem for the great national feasts. Eaton (1967) aptly summarizes it: "From far and wide they have come to dwell in the Holy City throughout the days of the great festival. The gathering is a sign of a great reality: the communion of saints, the society of love under God."

Similarly, the sense of community and human living are highly cherished values of traditional African life. For traditional Africans, the community is an arena for reconciliation, forgiveness, and interaction. The community is also basically sacred, even though secular, and surrounded by several religious forms and symbols. The pronoun 'we', 'our' is used in everyday speech. Each person, family, clan, tribe or society has a sense of belonging. An individual has to give homage to their families. The basic essence of everything is unity. Unity in the African culture is the most integral part which makes the Africans who they are and to know their purpose of existence.

Mbiti (1969) underscores the importance of belief and sense of the community among traditional Africans. The individual in Africa does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. Whatever happens to the individual is believed to happen to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say:

"I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man" (Mbiti 1969:106).

11. Extended Family

The extended family custom is not something strange in the Bible. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament have accounts of this beautiful custom respectively. The clearest biblical passages that show the importance of extended family are: "He had brought up Hadassah,

that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother; the maiden was beautiful and lovely, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter" (Es 2:7). "And immediately he left the synagogue, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever, and immediately they told him of her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she served them" (Mk 1:29-31). These biblical passages show that the networks of relationships among Mordecai and Peter's members of the family are remarkably extended and deep.

Similarly, the words 'family', 'brother' and 'sister', 'nephew' and 'niece', have a deep meaning in the African extended family. The family for the traditional African, as explained by Shorter (1975:98), mentions that this, "...usually includes one's direct parents, grand and great grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles, and aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews" which truly defines the African extended family. The extended family, therefore, for the traditional African, usually includes one's direct parents, grand and great grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles, and aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews. Further to this Shorter (1975:98) alludes to the fact that a child would refer to any of his uncles or aunts as his father or mother, his nephews, and nieces as his or her brothers and sisters.

People generally do not ask a child his or her personal name. Rather, a child is identified as 'a child of so and so parents.' The extended family system is the model. The molecular family pattern is alien and believed to be inimical to the traditional value of the community. Actually, it is only in recent years that the latter system began to surface mainly in urban towns as a result of external influences in the African continent. The extended family structure is held up to people as a model, one in which parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews, and nieces live together and are cared for by their children grand-children and other relatives in mutual love and respect.

12. Mediator

The concept of mediation is embedded in scripture. When human beings sinned, a great gulf existed between them and God. Jesus being a mediator came down and bridged the great gulf that existed between heaven and earth. Concerning the mediatory role of Jesus, the Bible records that: "His name shall be called Emmanuel...God with us" (Mt 1:23). Being God with us, Jesus came a mediator between heaven and the lost humanity (Lk

19:10). He never came to call from heaven to invite sinners to come over, but a mediator He came to lead us back to God. He said, “I am the way” (Jn 14:6). Writing about Christ’s mediatory work, John says: “My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1Jn 2:1). Jesus is our mediator; and our advocate with the Father.

In the African culture, mediation like in the bible is a common practice. In Zulu the word mediator is (*idombo*) and in Shona (*muyezi*). *Idombo* is someone who is appointed by the family to negotiate on their behalf. If a young man is getting married, his family identifies *idombo* and sends him to the bride’s family. *Idombo* is expected to fully respect the groom’s family in terms of economic, social, physical and spiritual status. The bride’s family is convinced to entrust their daughter into the care of the son-in-law through the services offered by *idombo*. In addition, *idombo* serves as a peace builder in Africa. When biological members of the family pick a fight, *idombo* is brought in to reconcile them. Thus, Christianity in Africa can be promoted through *idombo* value because Africans are familiar with its services. Obviously, Jesus cannot be compared to an ancestor as understood in African Traditional culture as His role was to save the world from sin, but the concept of mediation is deeply rooted in African culture and as such is not a strange concept in the Bible.

13. Conclusion

What has been addressed in this article is the importance of taking into cognizance how missions can be effected among Africans without alienating African customs and values to be a strange phenomenon in comparison to biblical custom and values. We have succeeded in maintaining that the Christian gospel can be presented to the African in an African plate, yet without diluting the truth of the message of the gospel.

While the above ideas and suggestions on how to put the gospel in context cannot be prescriptive, they are both descriptive and provocative. They leave behind a challenge and task to which every Christian leader should subscribe to in their missionary outreach. If possible, in the line with the above suggestions each Christian leader has to come up with a deliberate plan or strategy of recognising the importance of African customs and values in missionary endeavors. If we are to depart from a lethargic, docile, indolent and superficial Christianity we have to face the reality of contextualising the gospel all around by incorporating biblical customs and values with African customs and values.

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Authors' Declaration

The authors declare that there is no financial or personal relationship(s) that inappropriately influenced them in the writing of this article

Email: maniraj.sukdaven@up.ac.za
ndlovuh@solusi.ac.zw