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### **Christians facing modern culture in the city**

Nairobi is a city where people with many ethnic, racial and religious traditions live closely together. How does this influence modern culture in the city, and how do Christians of different denominations face modern culture? More precisely, is the Christian way of living compatible with modern urban culture, or are they opposed to one another?

### **What is culture?**

Culture, in its broad meaning, includes the social structures, norms, values and practices that underpin social identities, behaviours and creative activities. It is a certain way of feeling, thinking, acting and expressing. It depends on geographical, historical, and ethnic influences. Culture embraces everything that contributes to the survival of the human being. Culture can be compared to the roots of a tree, from where life develops. If you cut off the roots, the living organism dies. Culture determines the way in which we are living and interacting with one another. Our culture, into which we are born and brought up, as Luo, Akamba, Gikuyu or Maasai, to name only a few, determines our actions and tells us what is right or wrong.

Take, as an example, the widespread practice of female circumcision in many African cultures.

Without wanting to judge this practice, those who advocate it, do so from the perspective of their cultural tradition. They are convinced that it is a necessary practice.

Not all cultural practices are helpful or beneficial for the society, because they may have originated as an answer to a certain need at a particular time. If the needs of the society have changed, such cultural practices may need to change as well [e.g. wife inheritance].

### **Cultures must be life giving**

There is a practical indicator in judging the usefulness of cultural practices: They must be life giving, they must enhance the quality of people's lives. If these practices are hostile to life or endanger life, they need to be re-examined and possibly changed.

Each nation develops its own culture. Culture is then defined by what we think of the world, family and sexuality, work and leisure. It also influences our perception of God.

Is there such a thing as Christian culture? Yes, in the same way as we can speak of Muslim culture, Hindu culture, African culture, European and Asian culture. These cultures do not have to clash, as some politicians in the light of recent events seem to suggest. It is, however, at times necessary and helpful to identify cultural differences, not to gloss over them, but to celebrate the differences. We also must be aware of the fact, that each one of us has the tendency to overestimate the value of our own culture.

### **Culture and sexuality are closely linked.**

There are, however two super-cultures which are incompatible with one another:

- - A culture of life
- - A culture of death.

We develop a culture of life if e.g. we treat sexuality as a sacred gift from God, if we understand the unborn life as a result of God's action that allows the parents to cooperate with God in the creation of new life. But we develop a culture of death if we reduce sex to a form of entertainment, when procreation becomes recreation, when the conceiving couple looks at the newborn child as a meaningless accident, like a weed in the garden that may or may not be convenient to live. You

may think that this is exaggerated, but the huge number of abortions point in that direction. Either the culture of life will triumph and the world will be a civilised community, or the culture of death will spread where there is no respect of life. This will ultimately destroy civilization.

### **What is God's view of culture?**

Sometimes Christians have assumed that God is against culture. They refer to 1John 2,15: "*Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*" They assume that what God means by 'world', is what we mean by 'culture'. But in Jn 3,16 we read: "*God so loved the world*". The term 'world' [kosmos] is used in two ways:

- - In a positive way, as the people for whom God gave himself;
- - In a negative way, as the place of evil and sin.

The evil world, of which John speaks, occurs only within culture, but the world is more than culture. God is opposed to evil, not to cultural structures. In fact, he can only communicate with us through cultural structures, and we can only communicate with God through cultural structures, e.g. languages and customs.

We must also remember that Jesus was born into a specific culture, the Jewish culture, to which he subjected himself. He incarnated himself into a specific culture. But this does not mean that this particular culture is higher than other cultures. There is no single culture that would be valid for all peoples. God wants to reach each people through their own culture [1Cor.9, 19-22], and we perceive God only via our cultures.

### **Culture in the City**

Let us now turn more directly to the situation in the city, which is characterized by a great mixture of cultures as opposed to a more or less uniform culture of one ethnic group in rural areas. The lack or even absence of cultural norms and traditions in the city, and especially in the slums, may not be considered as life threatening as material poverty, but it has serious effects on people's lives: It affects the decision making in every day life. Without cultural norms, we are like travellers who have lost their direction on a road without signposts. Cultural poverty affects a person's identity and manifests itself in isolation and insecurity. It is interesting that the World Bank, which provides loans for developing countries, identifies cultural values as a necessary element in its effort of poverty reduction. Why should the World Bank be concerned with cultural values? In order to live normal lives in reasonable peace, we must behave in prescribed ways, based on cultural values. It is interesting in this context, that the Mungiki sect accuses the Gikuyu elders for having abandoned traditional values. They see in this loss the cause for all the misery in the country, like unemployment, poverty, criminal behaviour and promiscuity.

### **Cultural poverty in the slums**

One of the strongest forces in traditional African life has been a deep sense of kinship, which is based on blood and marital relationships. In the city, people from different traditions live and work together. They are often forced to live on their own. They become increasingly individualistic, protecting themselves against a hostile environment and against insecurity. They often don't trust one another. Especially in the slums, their behaviour is often guided by only one goal: how to survive in the deteriorating and inhuman environment. Urban illegality leads to high insecurity. There is also a high occurrence of mob violence. Take Korogocho slums: From Nov. to Dec. 2001 alone, at least 15 people were killed through mob violence. All were suspected of either robbery or theft, but 10 of the victims were later on found innocent. Under these conditions of insecurity, cultural values such as mutual respect, which are the key to peaceful living together, do practically not exist. I propose that especially in these conditions the Churches can play a vital role by

providing a new sense of belonging, of dignity and identity across ethnic divisions. It is also an opportunity for crossing denominational barriers and grass root ecumenism.

### **Traditional ways of conflict resolution**

Reconciliation is one of the most important services the Churches can offer to the community, especially in a violent city as Nairobi. In finding ways that lead to peace, it is important that the Churches also explore traditional ways of conflict resolution, as they are found e.g. in the Gikuyu community, since they represent the collective wisdom of the people. In the traditional Gikuyu understanding of justice [kihooto], a just person is somebody who is convinced that there is always a reasonable way of solving problems. Retaliation and revenge as a reaction for being harmed are not considered reasonable ways for solving problems.

### **Can culture in the city be fully Christian and fully African?**

Towns are necessarily multicultural. In towns, traditional cultures are modified by mutual contact and by the demands of modernization. Towns are power centres: political power centres, religious centres, education centres, medical centres, commercial centres, information centres. Life in the city is characterised by casual employment, job-mobility and job-competition. From a negative viewpoint, towns also contribute to impoverishment and immoral ways of living: there is juvenile delinquency, prostitution, drug trafficking, illicit liquor brewing [kumi kumi], street children and homeless people.

From a positive point of view, towns are channels of change and opportunities. Migration into the towns, which accounts for at least half of the town population, is based on the perceived attraction of the city. But many migrants remain focussed on the rural homeland, and only remain in towns as long as necessary. That means that many have their cultural roots in their rural homeland. This becomes most obvious when the question arises, where to bury a person.

As an answer to the multi-cultural reality of the city, various adaptive mechanisms have been created: These include ethnic welfare associations, which try to create micro-cultural environments, survival networks based on personal relationships, and, above all, the church communities.

### **Situation in the slums: more churches than toilets**

It is no secret that the number of churches and religious communities is in direct proportion to the intensity of poverty: the poorer the people, the more churches. Or as one of my students at Tangaza College wrote in describing the situation of Kibera Slums: "In Kibera, there is one toilet for 400 people, but there are more churches than toilets..." For many people the church communities is the main source of moral support and of orientation in the jungle of city life. The teachings and principles of the different Churches are like the signposts indicating the right direction, and preventing pitfalls. I believe that there is a great chance for the Churches to assist their members in finding the right direction as shown by Jesus, who said: "I am the way". Jesus accepted a particular culture, the Jewish culture of his time. At the same time, he criticised certain elements of that culture. This means that he accepts all cultures, as long as they are life giving. That is why African culture and Christian culture, although they are not identical, they are not opposed to one another. It must always be our aim to find ways that allow us to be fully Christian and at the same time fully African