

Confession and Reconciliation : The South African Case

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ABSTRACT Against the background of the reconciliation process in progress in South Africa, this contribution focuses on the African's approach to humanity as well as customs relating to confessions and reconciliation. The ethnographic material presented emphasizes that relations are cosmologically important to the African (which explains his concern to keep it intact), that the aim is to resolve disputes in an informal manner, and that aspects of his approach to humanity are conducive towards reconciliation which therefore should enjoy wider recognition and application. Reconciliation does not necessarily imply forgiveness, but at the same time does not equate justice with vengeance. "Justice" and "remembering" is, inter alia, accomplished through public confession, vociferous lamentation and penance.

INTRODUCTION

That the South African community is experiencing a process of democratization that includes the building of a "new" South Africa is common knowledge. One way in which it is being done is to reveal the truth about human rights violations to enable those who were responsible to ask for forgiveness. The *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act* (Act No. 34 of 1995, as amended by Act No. 87 of 1995) provides for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. At its first hearing, ANC member Joe Jordan told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of a torture session in September 1985 that left him with permanent spinal damage. Police had tied him naked to a bench in a cell : "They gave me electric shocks for a long time, I was screaming. Then a policeman who weighed about 90 kg jumped on me with his boots... They continued with the shocks, applying them to my genitals, to my anus, to every hole in my body they could find".

On Listening to the torture of Mr. Jordan (and others), Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Chairman

of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, burst into tears. The (more impersonal and factual) white-owned newspapers despairingly began to refer to the "weeping and confession" commission, and because of the empathy displayed by the chairman (partially due to the value he attached to human relations) questioned his ability to objectively hear cases. South Africa's history is interwoven with colonial, apartheid and liberation violence (cf. Hammond-Tooke, 1974: 367-394; Nurse et al., 1985: 72-80; and Stevens, 1967 : 15-23). Despite this, anthropologists in the past failed to pay much attention to the question of remorse and confession in Africa. Hammond-Tooke (1994 : 8) states that information on the topic is scarce and where available, insufficient. To obtain a broader insight into the socio-cultural norms applying to the Bantu-speaking peoples of South Africa in particular and Africa in general, the objective is to present ethnographic data on related subjects such as community and approach to humanity, confession and forgiveness as well as reconciliation. Data was obtained from literature with the provisional character thereof being acknowledged.

COMMUNITY AND APPROACH TO HUMANITY

The African's approach to life and humanity emphasizes religion as the essence of life—it is life (Kretzschmar, 1988 : 8; Van Wyk, 1993: 87 and Willoughby, 1970 : 1). The religious system is firmly rooted in the social structure (Hammond-Tooke, 1974 : 318 and 1994 : 10; and Smith, 1929 : 20) which results in relationships with both natural and supernatural dimensions that are also cosmologically important (Fernandez, 1967 : 4 and Fischer, 1981 : 33). As a result the unconditional religious-ritual admission is required of any complicity (guilt) in the

disturbance of relationships (Hammond-Tooke, 1994 : 9). These rituals can be effective only when peace and harmony prevail between kinsmen (Hammond-Tooke, 1974 : 346).

For the African the individual is indissolubly part of the community (Kretzschmar, 1988 : 37); membership is continued even after death (Willoughby, 1970 : 2). Man is defined in relation to the environing community; it shapes his mind and attitudes and provides an authoritative explanatory theory for the ultimate questions man asks himself. Likewise, "community" has a determining influence on the African's approach to humanity (Beattie, 1966 : 61; Hammond - Tooke, 1974 : 318 ; Van der Walt, 1996 : 10 and Van Wyk, 1993 : 88) and characteristics that promote intimacy (such as friendliness, politeness, adaptability, flexibility, humbleness, respect for authority and charitableness) are stressed (Van Wyk, 1993 : 89). (Such typification in itself does not imply that the African is not familiar with violence or that he is pacifistic in nature. One could call it the ideal-typical that applies to a specific community especially during a time of peace).

Due to urbanization, westernization and industrialization, the African's life underwent drastic changes. Research however confirms that his feeling/grasp/cognition of the community, the recognition of specific responsibilities as well as the fact that these have a particular and existential influence on his life, is still very much in the forgeround (de Ridder, 1961 : 169; Kretzschmar, 1988 : 36 and Willoughby, 1970 : 1).

CONFESSION AND RECONCILIATION

Groups such as the Tswana, Tsonga and Zulu have special reconciliation ceremonies (Hammond-Tooke, 1974 : 346 and Krige, 1988: 59). However, without remorse and confession reconciliation is not possible (Nolan and Broderick, 1987 : 79).

Specific aspects relating to and characteristics with regard to confession can be identified from literature. Firstly in this regard it can be mentioned that unlawful actions (*i.e.* that which have to be confessed) normally relates to the infringement of one or other taboo (cf. the Fan of Gabon, the Kikuyu of Kenya and the Tswana of

South Africa and Botswana—Willoughby, 1970: 373 - 376) which is primarily committed against the community, thereafter the ancestors and finally against the Supreme Being, with the meaning thereof not contained in the nature of the act but in the consequences for the community (Van Wyk, 1993 : 91)

Secondly authors such as Fernandez (1967 : 21-23), Kitshoff (1994 : 40) and Krige (1988 : 59) differentiate between separate categories of confession. Among the Zulu for instance there is mention of :

Ukuvuma (means agreeing) (The Zulu verb "Vuma" implies not voluntary confession of sins but agreement to and acknowledgement of those hidden facts adduced against one by the diviner;

Shweleza (means an expression of guilt and apologising) (For example, a pregnant woman experiencing a difficult delivery might best be eased by confessing a sin which could possibly be the cause and is offending the ancestors. But then the difficulty has to surface first for it to be coercive to confession. Willoughby reports similar practices among the Kikuyu and the Konde of Malawi);

Ukuhlanza (means a notion of purification/ washing/cleaning/ceremonial cleansing and a synonym for confession) (A person confessing is said to be purifying himself. And it is important to do it periodically, for if man did not confess, he could die from accumulated sins).

Thirdly there is the question of public confession that is required. By lamenting aloud and emphatically, a sense of mutual trust and dependence is established and the community's support is begged in a positive way (Kitshoff, 1994 : 40). Ackerman (1996 : 55) states in this regard that the aim of public lamenting is healing, since it provides a language in which to communicate pain, grief and disillusionment.

During public lamenting the person involved has the freedom of speech to say whatever normally may not be uttered (Smith, 1929 : 54-55). This most probably relates to story telling which is central to the African tradition (Tutu, 1996 : 7) and provides the opportunity to present self-perception. For the African each person and community has its own life history which is embedded in a framework of stories and narratives (Botman, 1996 : 37). People need these stories,

irrespective of what actually occurred and what should have happened (Okpewho, 1983 : 121), to learn to love one another, to understand, forgive and see things through someone else's eyes.

Should the personal and intimate nature of public confessions be such that it is not conducive to reconciliation and private confessions are allowed. This is the case with most of the African Independent Churches (Kitshoff, 1994: 41). While with the Konde, when extra-marital affairs are in question, neither the married women concerned nor their husbands are allowed to attend the confessions. Among the Kikuyu, a penitent too embarrassed to confess his misconduct publicly before the confessor, may do so before a stick which is then handed to the confessor. The latter would then accept the stick as if the confession had been made before him in person and would symbolically draw the blemish/shame from the penitent's heart to cast it away from him (Willoughby, 1970 : 374 - 376).

Finally reference could be made to penance which at the same time can be in the form of a sacrifice of atonement (which is aimed at repairing relations). The sacrifice itself however is not considered sufficient ; it has to be accompanied by confession (Hammond-Tooke, 1974 : 345). Beattie (1966 : 68) for instance reports on the Nyoro of Northern Africa where the guilty party has to deliver beer and meat to the plaintiff's family at a time agreed on for a social gathering to be organized. The festivity is marked by singing and dancing and in this convivial atmosphere the two parties are brought together for confession and reconciliation. Among the Kikuyu a sheep is given as sacrifice and among the Fan a hen or a goat (Willoughby, 1970 : 373-375).

On the other hand, as in the case of the Baluba of Central Africa (Tempels, 1946 : 92), penance can be aimed at bridging the dichotomy between good-evil, justice-injustice and injury-compensation for the right of life and life-force to be restored, protected and revitalized. For the African such actions are essential practice (Van Wyk, 1993 : 88) aiming at ontological cleansing and not at punishment, penance or reprisal as such. Injustice/injury towards minors is for example undone by acknowledgement and confession. In this way the seniors positive cosmological influence on juniors is restored. Where

equals are involved, accountability and action will only be called for once the wrath has dissipated, except when the one responsible for the injustice spontaneously and voluntarily attempts to restore relations.

It is common practice in Africa for actions aimed at the restoration of the right to life or delivery of sacrifices of atonement to occur voluntarily (cf. Beattie, 1966 : 68; Hammond-Tooke, 1974 : 362 and Tempels, 1946 : 92). Only where this is not the case formal justice and/or violence come into the picture. In this regard Hammond-Tooke reports on the Lobedu of South Africa where as much as 80 per cent of all disputes are settled informally.

From the foregoing data it is clear that confession contains an important element of "acknowledgement of personal accountability". Thus the principle of collective responsibility, which is common among the African people (Krige, 1988 : 233 and Myburgh, 1974 : 284), and recognition of their specific approach to humanity does not invalidate the necessity for confession.

CONCLUSION

The reprisal option (a type of Nuremberg trial with everything it implies : interrogations, cross-examinations, onus of proof, conviction, etc.) was not chosen as the path for reconciliation in South Africa. This means that people's subjective experiences, emotions, perceptions and willingness to come forward and to confess "I am sorry" are considered important.

The ethnographic material presented confirms that confession and reconciliation should be understood within a cultural context. South Africa is a multi-cultural society which means that there is a difference of approach among the various groups in terms of the subject under discussion. During the apartheid era no recognition (in a postmodernistic sense) was given to the pluralities of truths contained in this diversity. We in South Africa need this divergence of views to balance each other out. Consequently valuable aspects such as the African's approach to humanity should be valued positively. On the other hand the strong group feeling has the weakness of all communalism; it encourages

conservatism and conformity; and it does not always appreciate man's inalienable uniqueness as a person.

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