Challenging Poverty through Proverbs: 
An African Transformational Hermeneutic

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ABSTRACT
In his ground-breaking doctoral thesis, ‘An African Perspective on Poverty Proverbs in the Book of Proverbs: An Analysis for Transformational Possibilities’, Lechion Peter Kimilike advocates what could be called ‘a methodology from the African grassroots’ or ‘a methodology from below’. Poverty is a challenge facing many people at grassroots level on the African continent. These African masses readily find themselves at home as they interact with the Old Testament text on account of the many similarities that exist between the Old Testament and African world views. Challenging the elitist Western approaches to the Book of Proverbs, particularly how the scholars in question have failed to use the book to resuscitate the voice of the poor from the proverbs on poverty in this book, Kimilike proposes what can be called an African transformational approach to the Old Testament. He uses the latter, not only to suggest a possible popular social location for poverty proverbs in Proverbs, but also, drawing largely on the rich African lore that is African proverbs, to reread Old Testament poverty proverbs to challenge poverty in Africa. This paper is an attempt to make a brief presentation of Kimilike’s African holistic approach to the interpretation of the Book of Proverbs, an approach mainly shaped by the researcher’s African context.

A INTRODUCTION
‘We shall draw sustenance from universal human ideas and from the practical experiences of other peoples; but we start from the full acceptance of our African-ness and a belief that in our own past there is very much which is useful for our time’ (Emphasis Kimilike 2006:90; Nyerere1967:316)

In October of 1999, I was privileged to participate in a symposium on ‘The Old Testament in Africa’ at the foot of the Ngong Hills in Kenya. Different papers addressed various ways in which the Old Testament text could be made to interact with various African contexts. I was asked to read a paper that was to focus on using the African reality to unlock the reality of the Old

It is noteworthy that preoccupation of African scholars with contextual studies relating to the Old Testament has been a matter of concern for a long time. Perhaps what has changed over time has been the way in which scholars have named their different contextual frameworks. Some have called these African theologies ‘enculturation theologies’, ‘black theologies’, ‘liberation theologies’, ‘women’s theologies’ and others. Irrespective of the names, what made all these converge in my view, has been the scholars’ preoccupation with making sense out of Biblical Studies’ or Theology’s interactions with various African contexts. What made the Ngong Hills experience a historic moment in my view, however, is the observation that this was a first meeting organized for African Old Testament scholars in Africa, to engage issues of the contextualization of the Old Testament: a meeting held in Africa itself, a venture which ultimately produced a book!

Almost three years after this historic meeting, in 2002, I had yet another privilege, to be part of a joint project on the Africanization of Biblical Studies, co-ordinated by Knut Holter of the School of Mission and Theology in Stavanger, Norway. I had the pleasure to supervise a doctoral thesis entitled: ‘An African Perspective on Poverty Proverbs in the Book of Proverbs: An Analysis for Transformational Possibilities’. The researcher of this exciting and topical theme is Lechion Peter Kimilike.

My task in the present article is to give the reader a brief presentation of Kimilike’s context as well as the approach/methodology which he has employed in his doctoral work to interact with proverbs on poverty in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. As a point of departure, I will revisit the words of Nyerere underlined by Kimilike in the opening quotation above:

[...] but we start from the full acceptance of our African-ness and a belief that in our own past there is very much which is useful for our time (Nyerere1967:316).

While Nyerere, one of the former presidents of Tanzania, acknowledged that Tanzania, which also happens to be Kimilike’s mother country, was part of the global village, and, therefore, that in one way or other, it would have benefited from interactions with the international arena, through his policy of Ujamaa, he successfully impressed on the people of Tanzania that there was much to gain from their local resources. Nyerere called upon Tanzanians to fully accept their
African-ness and exploit this identity to the benefit of all. In my view, Kimilike’s African holistic approach to the Old Testament text expounded in this article is one such attempt. It is an attempt to use the rich African heritage, that is, African proverbs, to challenge poverty and the ideologies engendering it, both in the biblical text and in contemporary African societies.

**B WHICH THESIS SHAPES KIMILIKE’S DOCTORAL THESIS?**

In Kimilike’s view, the poor in Africa are not completely poor. The word ‘poor’ therefore warrants further analysis if used in African contexts. African peoples, including the poor, have been endowed with a rich cultural heritage which, when tapped into, could help them in their struggle against poverty. African proverbs on poverty have, argues Kimilike, an inherent transformational capacity:

> In this holistic approach to life the communicative dynamics of the proverb as an art form appear to be crucial. The proverb’s rhetorical, inventive, provocative and revealing language, based on beliefs and everyday life details, plays a large part in evoking the innermost reflection in a person, which may motivate him or her to a practical faith and moral action (2006:16; cf. also Dzobo 1982:92).

It follows from the above quotation then, that if this inherent transformational capacity is exploited fully, it can enable the poor to overcome their state of destitution. Because Kimilike’s research is Old Testament-based, he investigated similar proverbs, that is, proverbs on poverty from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. Arguing for a popular social location of these proverbs, vis-à-vis the elitist social setting proposed by Western biblical scholars of these texts, Kimilike contends that these proverbs, just like their African counterparts, originated from the setting of the folks, that is, from among grassroots peoples of ancient Israel (2006:125-128). In his view, both sets of proverbs, if reread or translated from a holistic African perspective, informed by the holistic world views of both traditional Africa and ancient Israel, can enable their users to challenge poverty in Africa.

Taking into account what was said above, Kimilike then ventured to grapple with the question of challenging poverty as it is experienced in African contexts. He uses Tanzania, his native country, as a point of departure to address poverty from an African perspective. He argues that the Bible continues to play a very key positive role in the lives of many African Christians on the continent of Africa. However, what bothers him is that the highly Christianized Sub-Saharan Africa continues to be poor, irrespective of its possession not only of the rich cultural resources, but also of a rich spiritual resource, that is, the Old Testament text. In order to grapple with this dilemma, Kimilike sets out to investigate a key problem in his research:
In what way can the African view on poverty (derived from relevant African proverbs) enable Bible readers to make meaning of or understand Old Testament proverbs on poverty in an attempt towards facilitating the empowerment of the poor in African Christian contexts? (2006:7).

This question, like many other research questions, is mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the researcher’s own context. Regarding the latter, one specifically has in mind those African researchers who, irrespective of the Western training they received, choose to do research on topical issues in their own African contexts. Says Kimilike: ‘Thus, the time is ripe for those at the margins in Africa, the ‘poor south’, to voice what we think of our African church and the continent’s problem of poverty as an example, but in a more appropriate manner’ (2006:15). Such researchers in my view refuse to address issues pertinent to foreign contexts. In an attempt to come up with an African perspective in their biblical studies, such scholars intentionally choose to make Africa a force to reckon with in their research (cf. Masenya 2004: 2005). This in my view is what Kimilike does in his doctoral thesis.

C WHICH CONTEXT SPAWNED THE RESEARCHER UNDER DISCUSSION?

1 Glimpse

The quotation below from the researcher’s thesis will hopefully give the reader a glimpse of his own context:

Firstly, I am an indigenous African, born and raised in a poor Tanzanian village. I live and minister among the majority of ordinary impoverished people in rural villages in Tanzania. In Tanzania, poverty, ignorance and diseases are the three biggest social problems. Since independence in 1961, the people, the government and institutions in Tanzania have been called to wage war continuously against these evils. The church acts as an integral part of the civil and social institutions in Tanzania and has been called upon to participate in government endeavours to eradicate the core problems of society. The invitation challenged and provoked me to explore the Hebrew Bible for responses relevant to Tanzania. I also responded, as a representative of ordinary Christians in my capacity as a church minister, to Nyerere’s comments that: [U]nless the Church, its members and its organisations express God’s love for man [sic] by involvement and leadership in constructive protest against the present human conditions, then it will become identified with injustice and persecution […] if the Church is not part of our poverty and part of our struggle against poverty and injustice, then it is not part of us (Kimilike 2006:8).
An analysis of the context of Kimilike from the quotation above, leads one to categorize the context of the researcher as post-independent and Christian Africa:

2 An African context in the post-independence era

Tanzania, the country which gave birth to the researcher, obtained its independence from British rule in 1961. Like many other former British colonies, this country is still feeling the pinch of the aftermath of the colonial rule. Tanzania ranks amongst the poorest countries not only on the continent of Africa, but also on the globe. It is the third poorest country in the world.

The researcher comes from one of the poorest sections of this country, a rural village in Tanzania. Perhaps it is no wonder that he has chosen African proverbs, as a potential resource to exploit the capacity of the African culture itself, to deal with different challenges faced by African peoples in the post-independence African setting. Contrary to many African urban dwellers, in these rural settings, argues Kimilike, proverbs continue to wield a great influence in the lives of ordinary grassroots people. These short pithy sayings continue to serve as powerful vehicles through which members of the community deal with various situations (2006:15-19; 94). Notwithstanding the challenges of poverty, ignorance and diseases which have plagued Tanzania since independence, Kimilike is convinced that there is hope. Hope in his view resides in the poor themselves. Equipped with an African transformational folklorist approach to the reading of the Old Testament text, the poor in Africa can face the challenge of poverty head on!

This researcher’s easy use of African proverbs to deal with everyday life situations, whether for educational, legal or social purposes, also reveals the African world view. This is an African holistic outlook on life, an outlook which knows no compartmentalization of reality into the political, social, spiritual, economic for instance. In this traditional African setting, this indivisible whole is, in fact, religious. There is a belief in the order which has been set by God and the ancestors to which members of the communities, including their rulers, have to adhere failing which, resultant negative consequences were to be expected (cf. Masenya 1989). This is something which resonates well with the optimistic outlook which is clearly discernible from many proverbs in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. Several African biblical scholars have advocated the compatibility between the world views in the African proverbs and those in the Book of Proverbs (Nare 1986; Nzambi 1992; Owan 1997).

Although what follows does not appear in the quotation above, the context of Kimilike’s research is not restricted to Tanzania. As can be gleaned from the title of his doctoral work, his is the broader sub-Saharan African
context. Within this broader African context, Tanzanian proverbs from the Bena ethnic group and the Swahili proverbs reveal the wisdom of the people who belong to the researcher’s immediate context. However, on account of the similarities in world view between different African peoples, similarities which can also be gleaned from the African proverbial material used in Kimilike’s research, and the observation that Africa is relatively a poor continent, the researcher has ventured to address the challenge of poverty as it is encountered also in the broader African context.

One other significant element regarding the nature of the researcher’s context that becomes notable from the quotation above is that it is a ‘Christian’ context. We now turn to this aspect.

3 An African Christian context

From the quotation above, the reader gets a glimpse of the role which the Christian church was — and still is — expected to play in civil society. In my view, the fact that the then top executive of the country, the late former President Julius Nyerere, could himself urge the Christians in the Tanzanian churches to serve as agents of positive change in the community, reveals the Christian nature of this African context. It should be noted that Christianity is not only popular in this particular African context. Research has shown that Africa South of the Sahara, has in recent years in fact become more Christian than the North (cf. Kimilike 2006:25).

The researcher is a minister among Tanzanian grassroots people. Motivated by his Christian faith and his commitment to the challenges which face his fellow African peoples, as well as his confidence in the positive aspects of African culture, Kimilike undertook to do the kind of research he has conducted in his doctoral work, that is, challenging poverty through African and Old Testament proverbial material. He contends: ‘In this study, I will employ the African traditional heritage to establish a coherent view of the subject of poverty from an African perspective. This will be followed by an extensive use of the African understanding of proverbs to interpret the texts on poverty from the Book of Proverbs’ (2006:7).

The similarities between the world views of Africa and ancient Israel have encouraged him to embark on such a cross-cultural study. What is fascinating about Kimilike’s attempt to bring the two cultures together, is that he, unlike many of his predecessors, has used the African resources, that is, African proverbs on poverty, to understand the Christian Scriptures, that is, the Old Testament, and not the other way around. The Western missionary view (also the view of many Western biblical scholars) which tended to view African culture mostly in a negative light, thus becomes problematic by this researcher’s approach. For him, it seems to me, the African context does not
always need to be a recipient, passive, acted-upon context. No. Other cultures, including the biblical Israelite cultures and the Western cultures, can actually learn something from Africa. As he embarks on this kind of approach, one hopes that grassroots African Christians will be given the confidence to reread the Christian Bible through their own eyes.

Kimilike argues that Nyerere’s words reveal the dilemma confronting the Christian church, particularly in Tanzania and on the whole African continent as well; either to be on the side of the rich and the powerful, drawing largely on prefabricated theology developed by the West or to be on the side of the poor. On whose side is the Tanzanian church? The question can be reformulated in this way: on whose side are African biblical scholars and theologians in the different African contexts? This leads us to the last pertinent question which we need to ask regarding the nature of Old Testament or Biblical Studies scholarship in African contexts. Do African theologians and biblical scholars treat topical contextual issues in their scholarship? Is this scholarship concerned about the plight of many people in Africa or is this scholarship detached? In the next sub-section I attempt to respond to the last question.

4 Is African biblical/Old Testament scholarship detached or concerned?

The question raised here is in fact closely connected, if not the same, as the one posed concerning the church earlier on. In many African church settings, African theologians and biblical scholars are important stakeholders. In such settings, it is no wonder that many of them are, in fact, ordained clergy. Also, many clergy who minister in the African churches were trained at faculties of theology or theological seminaries by faculty that are strongly influenced by Western theology. It follows, then, that if the professors drenched the trainees in foreign biblical studies/theologies, the churches and communities are likely to suffer the consequences of the teachings and the sermons which are contextually irrelevant.

As one reads through the researcher’s doctoral research, (cf. particularly chapters 2 and 4), one is left with no doubt that Kimilike laments the observation that African Old Testament scholarship is still to a large extent Western-oriented. In his view, the Western scholarship of poverty proverbs in Proverbs has not done justice to the material. It is no wonder that the commentaries, articles and books which they produced, fail to be helpful to African grassroots readers who want to challenge poverty in their own contexts. Even the few African scholars who do research on the Book of Proverbs, do not escape the trap of their Western-oriented training: ‘The Westernized interpretations clothed in African Christianity do not automatically engage meaningfully with the African social, economic, political and religious contexts’ (2006:244).
Through his African transformational hermeneutic, the researcher, therefore, sets out to rectify this state of affairs by deliberately choosing to use those resources easily accessible to ordinary African Christians, African proverbs, as hermeneutical tools to unlock the reality of poverty proverbs in the Book of Proverbs.

Having glimpsed the researcher’s context, in the next section we will focus on the methodology which was used by Kimilike to grapple with the main question of his research.

D AN AFRICAN METHODOLOGY WITH A TRANSFORMATIONAL CAPACITY?

1 A variety of methods

The question of Kimilike’s methodology was alluded to previously in this text. One has already noted the researcher’s commitment to take topical issues pertaining to Africa seriously in his approach to the Old Testament text. The observation that the African proverbial heritage is used as a hermeneutical tool to unlock its ancient Israelite counterpart also points to methodology.

In order to do justice to the nature of the material handled in his research, Kimilike preferred to integrate a variety of methods, such as rhetorical criticism, historical-critical research, a socio-anthropological approach within what can be referred to as his wider African contextual approach. One can therefore argue that these methodologies were not used as ends in themselves. They were used as means to achieve his end of eventually approaching the proverbial material on poverty from an African perspective. He argues:

> All the tools of exegesis in this thesis are permeated by an African folklorist reading. The goal of all these methods is to enable one to gain a deeper understanding of the poverty proverbs in the biblical Book. In particular, an integration of these approaches is of major importance not only for the development of an Africanised biblical scholarship, but also for the more general Africanisation of the humanities (2006:22).

The following examples will reveal what one means by the researcher’s employment of a variety of methodologies to achieve his contextual methodological ends. The social anthropological method is used in his research to analyze the African proverbial material. He employs this methodology in order to further explore his proposition of the social location of both pieces of the proverbial material, the African one and the ancient Israelite one. Positing such a social location enables him to argue that the poor people, themselves, were the producers of the proverbial material. The latter, as we will observe later in this section, have an inherent dynamic capacity to change situations for
the better. The poor peoples in Africa (even in ancient Israel) therefore had/have the capacity in themselves to use these transforming resources to challenge poverty on their own.

Historical critical research enables him, as far as possible, to situate the proverbs within their historical settings. Biblical scholars preoccupied with the Book of Proverbs know fairly well how difficult, if not impossible, it is to postulate exact dates for the different proverbs comprising this Book. His aim in using historical-critical methodology is not, however, to remain in the study of the biblical past. Kimilike uses this method which is basically rooted in the past, with a view to pointing to the close similarities between the proverbs used in the Israelite past and those used in modern day African societies, arguing that on account of these apparent connections, his African approach can enable him and his readers to make sense of the Old Testament proverbial material. Kimilike engages the debates of the Western scholars’ historical-critical research on poverty proverbs and blames their elitist interpretations for their incapacity to make the Book accessible to the poor. He argues:

The framework of Western biblical interpretations of poverty is also exclusive because its strategic point of departure is from above, that is, from the middle class perspective. It is understandable that this approach would prevent Western exegetes from imagining a different meaning of poverty in biblical texts, a meaning based on perspectives from below. In other words, it is a status-based linear model in which the elite develop and test new ideas and tell the poor what to do. As a matter of fact, constructing an interpretation of poverty on the preceding model leads to an ideological formation which sanctions poverty as ‘divine will in the Bible’ (2006:55).

Such an elitist view only reveals how ineffective this Book can be for use by the poor in their struggle against the challenge of poverty. Kimilike attributes such a view, among others, to these scholars’ comfortable social locations.

Even rhetorical criticism is not used by this researcher as an end in itself. As he employs these methodologies obtained from his Western-oriented theological training, he does not forget his needs as an African reader and researcher. Neither does he push aside the needs of his African Bible readers. Says Kimilike: ‘In short, the rhetorical approach in my particular case study uses the genre of proverbs with its parallelisms of word-pairs and chiasms to clarify and reinforce the reader’s conception of the theme contained in the selected proverbial material’ (2006:21-22).

In chapter 4 of his thesis, Kimilike performs a detailed exegesis of selected texts on poverty from the Book of Proverbs (2006:122-236). As he interacts with each text, first and foremost informed by his African holistic approach, he employs these methodologies and comes to the conclusion that
the Proverbial material on poverty, contrary to the views of many Western scholars, challenges the elitist status quo. His is an approach which is committed to the African context, a context plagued by poverty.

2 A contextual approach

As it has been noted previously, Kimilike’s approach is a contextually-relevant approach. He has allowed the needs of his African context to guide him in terms of the kind of research that would be relevant to African contexts. In addressing the theme of poverty in his work, he has reminded the political leadership on the continent and elsewhere on the global scene, that political independence should of necessity go hand in glove with economic emancipation. In opting for an approach that is friendly to those at the bottom of Africa’s socio-economic ladders, the researcher has managed to remind the poor that *Sesho se baba mongwai*, literally, the sore itches to the one who scratches it, that is, its owner! The very people who usually get the short end of the stick, have the capacity, from their own cultural heritage, to rise out of the destitute situation. While one reads the latter from the exegetical section of his work, one also hears Kimilike’s prophetic call to the corrupt rulers and the rich; to exercise their powers to do justice to the plight of the poor (cf. particularly his section on the political environment and poverty).

3 An African approach

Kimilike’s approach is not relevant to a generalized context. His is not a ‘universal, uniform’ context. Neither is his, a ‘universal’ generalized methodology. His methodology is an African methodology committed to an African context. As noted previously, what makes Kimilike’s approach so fascinating is his intentional use of the African wisdom on poverty in an attempt to make sense of poverty proverbs in the Book of Proverbs. Exploiting the points of similarity between traditional Africa and ancient Israel, the researcher exploits the holistic outlook of both cultures as it is portrayed by their proverbs, to challenge poverty both in the African context and in the biblical text. He is convinced that African proverbs have an inherent transformational capacity. Using them to reread the Old Testament Book of Proverbs can be an empowering exercise for the communities of the poor.

4 A transformational approach

A word about the transformational nature of the proverbial material will be in order at this stage even as we seek to address the transformational nature of Kimilike’s methodology. Motivated by the African proverbs which serve as tools of his research, Kimilike advocates an African transformational hermeneutic. In his view, the proverbs of Africa provide these transformational possibilities:
An inclusive community as the basic organization and dynamic organism that promotes functional and moral behaviour in society.

An emphasis on societal and communal mutual obligations and responsibility.

A vision of a community organization that encourages meaningful participation and a better life for all members.

A vision of an egalitarian community that affirms the inherent human equality before God.

A vision of a community that meaningfully restores the productive capacity of its members so that they can also contribute to sustaining the well-being of the society.

A life-centred educational process as the central aspect in empowering people with the knowledge and wisdom necessary for life (2006:240-241; cf. also: 15-19).

What kind of people is reflected in the preceding text? It is a community-oriented people and government (organization) in which each person, irrespective of his/her class, gender, ethnicity, age, for instance, is given an opportunity to participate in the welfare of all.

In short, in such a community, the principle of inclusivity is respected. Individuals in such a community cannot afford to be isolated from each other, each taking care of his/her own business, particularly when injustices remain. No. There is mutuality in terms of obligations and responsibilities. Each human being has the capacity to be productive towards the welfare of all people in the society and there is ‘A vision of an egalitarian community that affirms the inherent human equality before God’ (2006:240).

E CONCLUSION

Lechion Kimilike’s methodology is fascinating because he brings fresh African air to a setting which can be regarded as a highly Westernized Old Testament Studies setting in Africa. As he does this, he puts Africa on a pedestal, a necessary move indeed! It is an approach friendly to those on the margins, empowering them to be agents of their own transformation. It is a relevant approach, not only to the African continent, but to the rest of the world as it addresses a very crucial issue: poverty. One could go on and on singing praises to this methodology. I however choose to listen to the wisdom of the following African proverb: Kgomo ga a nye boloko ka moka (When the cow excretes, it does not excrete everything). I also choose to give you, the reader, just a little, in order to task you with a responsibility to read more about this great work once it becomes available.
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