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“Black Theology: The Notion of Culture Revisited”

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The notion of culture has been and remains one of the prominent emphases in black theology as it has emerged and continues to develop in South Africa, the United States, and in its various forms in different regions of the world. A basic claim of black theology historically and today is that there is a positive and affirming relationship between, on the one hand, people of African descent or the darker peoples of the world and, on the other hand, the liberating message of Jesus Christ as a manifestation of God’s justice and attention to the “little ones” of society. In other words, the divine presence amidst the brokenness of injustice reveals itself in the particularity of oppressed peoples’ culture. Thus, though there are varieties of black theology, they all presuppose the reality of culture, the centrality of culture, and the necessity of culture being a location for revelation. One only has to have a cursory acquaintance with the emergence of black theology in South Africa, the United States, Zimbabwe, Ghana, England, Cuba, Brazil, Jamaica, India, and other global regions in order to see the taken-for-grantedness of the notion of culture.

In these theological movements (which are basically attempts to discern the role of culture in developing a theological anthropology), we can notice profound grappling with how God relates to or encounters locked out voices in their Christian and indigenous faith claims. Debates unfold around the nature of black culture, black Christian culture, African indigenous culture, and the mixture or intertwining of different cultures.

Questions arise such as: How does God liberate in the midst of contemporary post-modern culture? In the struggle to become full human beings who can live out the authenticity of cultural identities as black people or people of African descent, what is the relation between politics and culture or economics and culture? There are even concerns relative to the culture of globalization and its impact on the movement of black theology as a global phenomenon. And, furthermore, the question arises: What are the spiritual dimensions of culture?

Again, what is presupposed in the complex nuances of these investigations and queries is a pre-understood notion of culture in black theology. What I suggest in this presentation is that the notion of culture needs to be revisited. We need to deepen the conversation around its definition in order to bring clarity to that which is so easily assumed.

### The Notion of Culture

Culture, as defined by Randwedzi Nengwekhulu, has three intertwined aspects. It is (i) “the totality of the results of human labour, i.e. the results of material and spiritual wealth created by human labour, culture is ‘the development of human productive forces...’” Human labor is complemented by what Nengwekhulu calls (ii) “spiritual culture. This includes philosophy, science, ideology, art, literature, religion, education, etc.” “expressed in and through concepts of spirit and spirituality...” And these two (i.e., human labor and the spiritual) are closely tied to (iii) “‘artistic culture’ which is in reality the figurative objectification of artistic creativity.” Culture, defined in its three manifestations of human labor, the spiritual, and the artistic, operates in an

interpenetrating activity as it experiences the interplay between the material and the spiritual. Nengwekhulu underscores the relative autonomy of the spiritual aspect from the material. That is, the spiritual aspect of culture is not a passive reflection of the material economic. Spirituality is relatively autonomous. It too can take the lead in the human labor-spiritual-artistic relations. Nonetheless, though relatively autonomous, Nengwekhulu states that the spiritual is rooted in the material aspects of social life. Hence changes in the economics of production are accompanied by changes in the other definitions of culture.<sup>1</sup>

At this stage of the discussion, a three-part definition of culture helps to underscore the interconnections between material and spiritual realities in such a way that all of humanity's activities include the realm of culture. In addition, we see a clear distinction between the material and the spiritual. The separation (obviously for intellectual purposes, for, in the real world of human activity, they occur together, simultaneously) fosters a further look at each component part.

### Human Labor

Amilcar Cabral's insights link culture with pedagogy, ethics, and the prophetic; that is to say, culture is contextual and impacted by social location. Moreover, we move to Cabral's stance because he takes up the debate about the human labor or political economic trajectory in the notion of culture advanced by Nengwekhulu. Within black theology, this sector of the African or black peoples finds itself located in a definite political economy. Hence, the revisiting of economics vis-à-vis culture is warranted at this point.

Cabral offers the following broad materialist related definition of culture: There are

strong, dependent and reciprocal relationships existing between the *cultural situation* and the *economic* (and political) *situation* in the behavior of human societies. In fact, culture is always in the life of a society (open or closed), the more or less conscious result of the economic and political activities of that society, the more or less dynamic expression of the kinds of relationships which prevail in that society, on the one hand between [the human person] (considered individually or collectively) and nature and, on the other hand, among individuals, groups of individuals or classes.<sup>2</sup>

Culture emerges out of the human energy, creativity, and struggle exerted by the human person (i.e., individual self or communal selves) in relation to nature (i.e., technological and natural) and in relation to various human beings occupying definite societal positions. The idea of culture, then, operates not in and of itself as a conceptualization isolated from the material formations of how people organize both their micro-everyday living and their macro-systemic arrangements. Human beings are conscious of their cultural choices and intended creations. Culture, furthermore, has definite links to political and economic activities prevailing in a present period and ties to specific traditions again influenced by culture's relation to the historical development of humanly created economic and political setups. Cabral's accent on the dependent and reciprocal connections of the cultural and the political-economic allows for more interplay among these human factors. Not a uni-directional dynamic but an effecting and receiving movement obtains here.

Cabral also adds a view of history and the mode of production as they play a part in cultural development. Whatever culture's traits, culture acts as an essential part of a people's history; and, for Cabral, history and culture both have the mode of production for their concrete basis. His definition of the mode of production fosters an understanding of the culture-history-mode of production overlapping. He comments:

Now, in any given society, the level of development of the productive forces and the system for social utilization of these forces (the ownership system) determine the *mode of production*. In our opinion, the mode of production whose contradictions are manifested with more or less intensity through the class struggle, is the principal factor in the history of any human group, the level of the productive forces being the true and permanent driving power of history.<sup>3</sup>

Culture is greatly determined by the economic interactions and positioning among people. More specifically, one's ownership of, power of distribution of, and relation to material wealth (i.e. nature, technology, machinery, and people) can impact one's cultural creativity and perception of culture. Likewise, class relations (that is, who owns wealth rather than only income and who owns, controls, and distributes the materials used for economic production in a society) express the dynamics and traditions of human interactions – hence the mode of production powers human history. Because class connections are dynamic, are expressions of the mode of production, and provide the engine for history and because culture has both the materialist base of the mode of production and is an element of human history, then when one speaks of culture, one simultaneously speaks about history and the mode of production. Therefore, however one defines culture, if culture is somehow wrapped up in the mode of production (i.e., issues of ownership of wealth), then culture touches on classes and their social, economic, and political differentiations.

Cabral, no crass economic determinist, states that culture is constituted by oral and written traditions, works of art, dance, cosmological ideas, music, religious beliefs, social structures, politics, and economics. Yet, his underscoring the culture-history-political economy dimension facilitates a perspective of culture as a mode of historical and dynamic resistance. Because culture has a materialist relationship, the advancement of progressive culture (i.e., one against the monopolization of power over others) can, in its reciprocal relationship to its materialist connection, both reflect the level of wealth ownership and distribution and spur on opposition to non-democratic social relations in the areas of material life. Culture can assume an agential role in the resistance to and

possible transformation of how people operate in the structures of a society's economics and politics. Indeed, cultural resistance, Cabral submits, generally precedes comparable resistance in the domains of economics and politics.

Again exemplifying the reciprocal nature of culture, Cabral claims that those who intentionally participate in "liberation" movements signify "the organized political expression of the culture of the people who are undertaking" the effort for the democratization of ownership of wealth, environment, and social activities. Not only can culture influence certain parts of the mode of the production, politics can impact certain dimensions of culture; thus politics, by way of culture, can act upon the mode of production as well.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, Cabral brings additional conceptual categories into the notion of culture. He clearly opts for a popular culture; that which emanates more or less from social sectors lacking ownership and control over wealth. While embracing the creativity from all civic strata, including the privileged, Cabral emphasizes "peoples culture." In his summation, he offers these final cultural goals: the development, first, of popular culture or people's culture based on positive values indigenous to this group; development of a national culture based on the history of struggle for justice; promotion of political and moral awareness along with patriotism (of course, a patriotism circumscribed by the democratization of the mode of production and all that relates to it – i.e., history and culture); development of scientific culture to foster material progress; the advancement of a universal culture inclusive of art, science, literature, etc.; and the assertion of humanistic practices such as solidarity with, devotion to, and respect for other people.<sup>5</sup> With Cabral, I agree with his method of focusing on the initial dynamic of people's culture; for me in my social location, this indicates black folk tales — a unique tradition of those North Americans of African descent occupying structures of poverty and extreme locations away from ownership of wealth and distribution of wealth (that is to say, peripheralized citizens within the mode of production). And, too, I concur with his

emphasis on moving from this particularity out into the universal implications of people's culture as they contribute to the general human storehouse of experiences while, concomitantly, learning from and appreciating what overall human creativity and energies offer all specific cultures.

### The Artistic

Culture, drawing on Randwedzi Nengwekhulu's previously cited definition, consists of the totality of human labor, spiritual culture, and artistic culture. Our extended conversation regarding the political economy of culture attempts to broaden out Nengwekhulu's dimension of human labor. Now we view what he terms "artistic culture"; specifically I'd like to talk about culture's aesthetic trajectories. For this part of the discussion, we draw on Barry Hallen's interesting suggestions relating to his work in Nigerian culture since the 1970s.

Hallen's scholarly work (that of a formally trained philosopher) approaches indigenous worldviews of the aesthetic by conversing with the elders of a local community. In his case, he argues that the systematic comprehension of the aesthetic aspects of culture are disclosed in the intellect of the "onisegun." Their title roughly translated as the masters of medicine, herbalists, or alternative medical doctors, these people are the repositories of the collective wisdom, experience, and traditions of the Yoruba.<sup>6</sup> After decades of interrogation of and, in turn, by the "onisegun," Hallen discovered that cultural aesthetics pertained not so much to arts or crafts, though these were not lacking in his investigation, but to the relevance of "beauty" as a manifestation of the aesthetic. Here, too, beauty was deployed not primarily regarding arts and crafts but as beauty related to people or human beings.

The aesthetic or beauty of a person referenced the body and the type of clothing worn by an individual. For instance, one is liked, in the sense of being beautiful, due to the color and fitting of clothing; hence beauty of the physical is enhanced by the type of

outerwear or exterior trappings displayed in bodily appearance. Yet, even this perspective of beauty is consistently coupled with ethical traits of the human being's personality.

Hallen comments: "In virtually every account of the term, ... beauty as a physical attribute was rated superficial and unimportant by comparison with good moral character as a ... form of 'inner' beauty."<sup>7</sup> One recognizes beauty manifested in the corporeal highlighted by clothing or other outer adornments. Still, deeper beauty, which even supercedes the initial perception of the eye, must be detected by righteous ethics in conduct. The absence of a good moral character defiled perceived beauty, making the latter rather superficial. In contrast, individuals can lack in good looks, rhetorical eloquence, and social adeptness, but embody a good person's personality. Therefore, beauty and character accompany one another. The "onisegun" claimed consistently: "If the person ... is good looking ... but his or her innermost self ... is bad, they will still call him or her an immoral person.... Whenever anybody does bad things, it means his or her inside self may be bad...." The inside of an individual controlled the community's determination of the individual's beauty. When a physically attractive individual actually turns out to possess bad moral character, this signifies that the innermost self of the individual is bad or immoral.<sup>8</sup> The verbal and nonverbal behaviors become decisive in adjudicating the presence of beauty in character. The aesthetic or beauty in culture coexists and accompanies moral attributes and thus the community (i.e., the collective selves) offers a norm to ferret out beautiful and non-beautiful human character in the human being (i.e., the individual self).

The aesthetic of the person is accompanied by the aesthetic of the natural. "By natural," Hallen purports, "is meant the 'world of' nature, of all those things that are neither human nor (hu)man-made. In a sense, 'human' being also is a part of nature, of course, but what sets it apart from all other things in the world is the kind of self..."<sup>9</sup> The distinguishing marks between human self and nature denote the former's intelligence, ability to speak, and the possession of moral character. With this differentiation in genus,

the aesthetic of the natural consists of the human self admiring or valuing an object of nature simply for its external, physical beauty. For instance, the coloration of the natural or the fullness of its bodily dimensions can point to beauty in and of itself. Such an aesthetic passes the consensual judgment understood or enunciated by a communal perspective. Still, in the same cultural context the aesthetic of the natural can result from its utility, somewhat like that criterion elaborated about the aesthetic of the person whereby, though one acknowledge the potentiality of beauty of the human self for its own sake, the moral character provides a more genuine sense of an individual's beauty. In this context, one labels the "character" of the natural based on situating the natural object within human groups and adjudicating beauty relative to the natural object's utilitarian functions for that community.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Hallen offers the aesthetic of the "(hu)man made," the consequence of human creation and energy to manufacture that which is neither strictly the natural or inherently already given in the definition of the person. Common characteristics of such beauty include color, newness, the finishing process, or the shininess of human manufactured objects. Hallen, moreover, concedes that these aesthetic traits are found in descriptions of art. What he hopes to add to this commonly accepted portrayal is the aesthetic aspects and, usually, disregarded beauty of "plebeian objects" such as a person's farm, thereby aiding in righting "the aesthetic imbalance" resulting "from collectors' and art historians' disproportionate concerns with figurative carvings and sculpture." Again, like the aesthetics of the person and of the natural, the aesthetic of the human-made draws its character (that is, a community's hierarchy of values regarding better and lesser quality) from the usefulness and durability of the human-manufactured object.<sup>11</sup>

### The Spiritual

In the beginning of this conversation on the notion of culture and theological anthropology, Randwedzi Nengwekhulu elaborated three aspects to the definition of

culture. We turn now to his final category regarding the *spirit* in culture. Kwame Gyekye helps in this manner when he offers an understanding of “spirit” as inherent to culture: “I use the term ‘culture’ in a comprehensive sense, to encompass the entire life of a people: their morals, religious beliefs, social structures, political and educational systems, forms of music and dance, and all other products of their creative spirit.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently, discussions about spirit denotes the creativity that unfolds in culture, a creativity that animates both human labor and the artistic. Beneath or powering all that human beings concoct (i.e., both the means of production and the relations of production) and each realization of art (i.e., as the aesthetic of the classical and the good works; as function, depersonalized, and community-oriented) resides the spirit which weaves throughout the entire life of a community of common discourse and historical memory. Hence when one speaks of the creative genius of that which results from human effort, either by the work of human labor or artistic labor, one speaks about a spirit often termed a “special gift to create.”

Again, aiding us in summing up our overarching approach to the spirit-culture interchange, Gyekye submits that one would be remiss to separate absolutely or draw too strong a divide between the religious and the nonreligious, the sacred and the secular, or the spiritual and the material. For my purposes, it is the latter pairing which corroborates my claim of the spirit inherently dwelling as a dimension of culture. One cannot detach oneself from the ever-presence of something or someone or some being or some force greater than the human self or collective selves.<sup>13</sup> For Christians of all stripes, God fulfills this definition. God is the source of the creative energy of the human psyche, soul, and body — an originative force which allows the human self or the human selves to produce, by way of innovation, products which to humans, on first take, would seem impossible to produce. This is precisely what one often calls genius or, in more Christian language, a miracle. True acts of labor (as labor interacts with nature, other humans, and technology) and exceptional products of art (in the modes of the classical, good, functional,

depersonalized, and community-oriented) are acclaimed by most communities as work far beyond the ordinary human feat. Indeed, it is often hailed as an extra-ordinary accomplishment especially because it surpasses the expectations of the everyday, the mundane, or the usual.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye reminds us that spirituality as the third and animating trajectory in culture does not remain neutral. It brings normative claims that judge, critique, and correct the traumatic ramifications in both the sources of the past and the present. “Spirituality is a holistic and continuous process of becoming,” she asserts. “It enables me to look at others with mutual respect. Spirituality is always coupled with justice. The more I grow spiritually, the more I am concerned with justice and taking action for justice.”<sup>14</sup> Through this normative value and world view, Oduyoye sifts through both the past and the present and discerns the harmful affects of both cultures on the status and role of women. As typical examples, she references women’s negative part in childbearing, marriage, nurturing, and segregated decision-making by sex. Her reasoning points to the disempowerment themes in modern and indigenous spiritualities. Moreover, traditional proverbs and modern Christian dogma, each containing and teaching definite values and sensibilities about women, are spiritually flawed. “The Hausa [of Nigeria] have a proverb that many African women need to hear. It goes like this: ‘They pat the cow before they milk her.’ So beware of adulation. For Christian women it is the theology of the cross that they have to suspect. A spirituality of the cross without resurrection is promoted among women.”<sup>15</sup> Thus all spiritualities exist as sites of contention between salutary qualities and incapacitating effects.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusion

In this presentation, looking at the framework of human labor, the artistic, and spirituality, we have advanced the position that the notion of culture must be taken seriously due to its fundamental presuppositional status in the varieties of black theology

in South Africa and the United States, as well as in other global regions. For my purpose, J.N. Mugambi's schema of culture clarifies, in summary fashion, what is culture. He establishes, what he terms, seven pillars of God's house constituting culture: politics (i.e., deciding, sharing, and distributing); economics (i.e., sharing and distributing resources); aesthetics (i.e., dealing with proportions and forms of beauty); kinship (i.e., the basic primary relations in society — the family); recreation (i.e., relaxation and renewal of self and selves); religion (i.e., worldviews and inter-human relations around ultimate concerns); and ethics (i.e., values of right and wrong).<sup>17</sup> All seven are sacred or relate to an ultimate vision or concern upon which matters of life and death are decided. A qualitative vision or concern transcends the individual self or communal selves, consequently the spiritual trait appears. And culture is not pristine, neutral, romantic, or statically given. It operates in a flow that is animated by the spirit (for Christians, God's spirit) in contention with adverse spirits (i.e., that which harms life and systematizes a monopolization of God's creation by one group).

Culture is where the sacred reveals itself. As a result, one only knows what she or he is created to be and called to do through the human-created realm of culture. On our own, we are limited to this realm. If we could enter the divine realm by using human efforts, there would be no need for the divine; indeed, such a human capability would restrict divine power to ultimately determine the definition of what it means to be a full human being. Because humans cannot create the divine realm, the ultimate vision or the divine spirit must impinge upon and enter the human condition.

Not only does the divine spirit or ultimate vision enter the human sphere, the human being has the presence of the divine spirit or ultimate vision within the human being itself, no matter how smothered or covered over this sacred dimension may appear. Therefore, culture is sacred in so far as the ways of being human in the world entail some yearning for, belief in, and ritualization around that which is ultimate vision — that which is both part of and greater than the self. Culture is sacred because the ultimate

vision is both present in the material (the tangible manifestation inspires humans to keep moving forward) and in the transcendent (the imagination of the ultimate is not limited to the self).

However, though all of culture contains the sacred, the ultimate goal or vision (i.e., divine spirit) of what it means to be human in community is continuously challenged by evil or that which prevents individual full humanity in relation to healthy community. Culture is contested terrain between marks of life and death.

And finally, the norm is liberation, that is, whatever fosters the freedom of the individual self and the interests of those structurally occupying the bottom of community (i.e., in particular citizens dwelling in systemic poverty as well as working class people) is good culture because the movement towards practicing freedom for the poor marks the revelation of God. Basically, as one attends to black theology and its myriad global manifestations in the twenty-first century, it is important to maintain its focus on those who still suffer and, furthermore, we need further conceptual clarity around the notion of culture, which is so central to the everyday lives of those with whom and for whom we say we speak a word of justice.

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<sup>1</sup>Randwedzi Nengwekhulu, “The Dialectical Relationship Between Culture and Religion In The Struggle For Resistance And Liberation,” in *Culture, Religion, and Liberation*, edited by Simon S. Maimela (Pretoria, South Africa: Penrose Book Printers, 1994), 19.

<sup>2</sup>Amilcar Cabral, “National Liberation and Culture,” in *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 41.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 43-44 and 50.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>6</sup>Barry Hallen, *The Good, The Bad and The Beautiful: Discourse About Values In Yoruba Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 114-115.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 117

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 120-121.

<sup>12</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra, Ghana: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1998), xiii.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>14</sup>Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Spirituality of Resistance and Reconstruction,” in *Women Resisting Violence*, edited by Mary John Mananzan, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Elsa Tamez, J. Shannon, Mary C. Grey, and Letty M. Russell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 163.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>16</sup>Kwame Gyekye agrees with Oduyoye when he states: “In talking about cultural values, I do not imply by any means that there are no cultural disvalues or negative features of the African [traditional] cultures. There are, of course; and they are legion.” Op.cit., 171 and 174. Likewise, Kalilombe challenges traditional spirituality by stating that the seeds of negative spirituality pre-existed foreign contact, particularly the failure to allow for some forms of “individualistic ambition, aggressiveness, and self-interested acquisitiveness.” Op.cit., 129.

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<sup>17</sup>From J.N.K. Mugambi's lecture given at the Pan African Consultation on Religion and Poverty in Nairobi, Kenya, July 20, 2002. Notes in author's possession.