

Poverty in Ecclesiastes and Akan Culture for African Development Agenda: A Dialogical Reflection on the Church's Role

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Abstract

The AU Agenda 2063 gives much space to the poor and vulnerable in its plan for authentic development in Africa. Paradoxically, some African ethos and culture hardly recognize the place of the poor and accord them any dignity as if they have nothing to offer to the community. This paper explores Ecclesiastes' paradigmatic voice on the discrimination of the poor to reveal views about the poor from an Akan perspective. It employs a dialogical reading of Ecclesiastes and Akan proverbs that emphasize discrimination and injustice to offer proposals on how African Christians can contribute to the affirmation and inclusiveness of the poor. The Africa we want where poverty is reduced cannot be achieved if the Christian Church and theological educators do not critically look at the Akan proverbs that negatively shape a people's worldview about the poor and offer new proposals for development.

Key words: *Poverty, Agenda 2063, Ecclesiastes, Akan culture, African Development Agenda*

Introduction

The socioeconomic challenges of Africa have made the continent the poorest in the world. This condition has influenced leaders of African nations to promulgate Agenda 2063, which is a shared strategic framework for inclusive growth and sustainable development. The Agenda was adopted in January 2015 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia at the 24th African Union (AU) Assembly of Heads of State and Government. It was developed to work within a time frame of fifty years, (2013 to 2063), and is based on the aspirations, namely: 1) A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development; 2) An integrated continent, politically united, based on the ideals of Pan Africanism and the vision of Africa's Renaissance; 3) An Africa of good governance, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law; 4) A peaceful and secure Africa; 5) An Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values and ethics; 6) An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children; and 7) Africa as a strong,

united, resilient and influential global player and partner.⁶⁹ Significantly, all seven aspirations focus on solidarity, inclusiveness, unity, justice and identity of the African.

It is ironical that although Africa is striving to eradicate poverty, the Akans of Ghana still harbour some views about the poor that are dehumanizing. Some of the Akan cultural ideologies look down upon the poor and they are hardly treated with any dignity. For example the Akan hold that, *Ohianyɛ asem yɛ mbɔbɔr* (lit. the words/matters of the poor person are gloomy). Not only are the words from the poor woeful; the personality of the poor is very distasteful. Akan claim that poverty is a curse so the poor cannot be welcome. Significantly, there is no single proverb or saying among the Akan that seeks to empower the poor. Such negative attitudes can affect the ideal of a prosperous Africa where the potentials of all are supposed to be counted to achieve the vision of “an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena.”⁷⁰ The church, although ministering to the poor, hardly affirms their dignity and contributions in the body of Christ and Ecclesiastes 9:13-16 is a case in point. This paper seeks to bring together Ecclesiastes and Akan perspectives on discrimination against the poor into dialogue with the purpose of highlighting the challenges and need for a transformation of thought about the beliefs and perceptions of the poor so that society would smoothly embark on sustainable development and make Africa what we want it to be.

It contends that cannot develop if Akan attitudes towards poor are not addressed. As such a critique of Ecclesiastes and African ethos about the poor must be the Christian church’s contribution towards Africa’s development. The paper argues that affirmation of the contributions of the poor and vulnerable in Africa should be at the heart of development and Christian ministry. Thus faith must open imaginations to new possibilities of solidarity. It is in this light that the proverbs and wise sayings which lie at the heart of African cultural beliefs, perception, and worldview need to be re-examined.

Africa’s Option for the Poor

Agenda 2063 was built on the foundations of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were developed with the hope that the momentum provided by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) could continue in seventeen categories. At the heart of the seventeen categories of the SDGs is an urgent call for action by all countries – developed and

⁶⁹ “Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want,” Final Edition (April 2015):2, in <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>, Date accessed 20 March 2019

⁷⁰“Agenda 2063,” 1.

developing – towards global partnership, solidarity and community. While the MDGs and SDGs were both established with a global mindset, Africa particularly chose to focus on aspects that are peculiar and pertinent to it. The African Union’s Agenda 2063, thus focuses on African people specifically and calls for collaboration. In all, the SDGs, MDGs and Agenda 2063 recognize that it is possible to create opportunities for all to fully contribute to growth and development. Agenda 2063 looks up to combat inequalities towards universal respect for human rights and human dignity, equal opportunity for all, permitting the full realization of human potential, contributing to shared prosperity and inclusiveness of the vulnerable in society.

The commitment to ensure that no one will be left behind – the poor and the rich, is not for governments and leaders of nations alone. The church has a key role to play. In an address by HE Archbishop Bernardito Auza, a Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations in 2015, it was revealed that about 14.5% of the world’s population described as extremely poor and the number could be reduced to 7% in 2030, but “with the collaboration of faith-based and other civic organizations, we can bring down that number to just 3% by 2030.”⁷¹ Such a view shows the crucial role the church can play in transforming society and influence the dignity of all in African society so that Agenda 2063 can be achieved.

Agenda 2063 has its first target as poverty reduction. The view is that poverty reduction will lead to “a high standard of living, and quality of life, sound health and well-being.”⁷² It will afford inclusive growth, gender equality, youth empowerment, increase in wealth and GDP, innovative agricultural practices, development of human capital that will give Africans a voice in trade, climate and water management.⁷³ Poverty is actually at the core of life and dignity because it exploits what it means to be human. For authentic development, there is the need to harness the efforts of everyone and dismantle the tensions created by inequalities of social and economic wealth. A prosperous continent where all are included will enhance the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the Vision of Africa’s Renaissance where each one considers the liberation and independence of the other, promote solidarity and integration which is the focus of Aspiration 2. Consequently, it will provide a culture of gender equality and respect for human rights which is the focus of Aspiration 3. Inclusiveness, solidarity and equality will allow peace to prevail to build a strong cultural identity where religious and spiritual beliefs

⁷¹ Bernardito Auza, “Religion and Sustainable Development Goals,” (Address to a forum on The Relevance of Interreligious and Inter-Civilization Dialogue to the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals” Unites Nations, New York March 27, 2015),11.

⁷² “Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want,” 2.

⁷³ “Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want,” 2-3.

will promote African identity as in Aspirations 4 and 5. The strong partnership which Aspiration 7 envisages also flows from Aspiration 6 which is equally about the people, heritage, values and ethics and is explained, among others as follows: “All the citizens of Africa will be actually involved in decision making in all aspects. Africa shall be an inclusive continent where no child, woman or man will be left behind or excluded, on the basis of gender, political affiliation, religion, ethnic affiliation, locality, age or other factors.”⁷⁴ The foundation upon which Africa wants to develop begins with addressing poverty so that all can be fully accepted, protected, rewarded and harnessed for the benefit of society. This means all forms of marginalization, inequalities and discrimination will be abhorred.

The poor have always been with us

The Africa we want is one in which prosperity is the goal. But can there be a time when Africa cannot be called poor? Interestingly, many have wondered why Africa is poor when it boasts of unique natural endowments, ecosystem including wildlife and wild lands, cultural heritage and values. Africa has lots of natural resources, estimated about 30% of the world’s known mineral reserves but is poor with no status and recognition as a global player. In fact, the rich resources in Africa do not mean much in the politics of economics. Similarly, there are some rich people in Africa. While it is known that in Africa many people are under the poverty line, the number of people becoming wealthy is increasing. In a report by John Njiraini, he said:

Evidence that opulence has found a new home in Africa can be seen across the continent. According to New World Wealth, a consultancy based in the UK and South Africa, there are about 165,000 very wealthy individuals in Africa with a combined net wealth holding of more than \$660 billion. This equates to roughly 28% of total individual wealth held on the continent. From 2000 to 2013, Africa’s very wealthy individuals increased by more than 150% compared to the worldwide growth rate of 73%. In 2013, South Africa topped the list with 48,800 dollar millionaires, followed by Egypt with 23,000, Nigeria with 15,900 and Kenya with 9,000.⁷⁵

⁷⁴“Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want,” 8.

⁷⁵John Njiraini, “Is Africa the new face of rising wealth and opulence?” in <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2015/africa-new-face-rising-wealth-and-opulence> date accessed 4 July 2019

The presence of wealthy people among the poor does not mean that a country is necessarily rich, and similarly the presence of poor people among the rich does not mean that a country is necessarily poor. There are poor people in rich and developed countries, confirming the biblical saying that the poor will always be with us (Deut 15:11; Matt 25:11; Mk 14:7).

Essentially, the definitions of wealth and prosperity are not only about what one possesses, but also one's place in society. By virtue of exclusive social and economic controls, wealthy persons who are Africans may not be considered rich as long as they belong to a poor society and social system. The actions and contributions of those who have riches and sufficient resources in society truly make such persons prosperous. It is not the abundance of money but the abundance of virtue. Prosperity plays a key role in determining the total well-being of all people including physical, spiritual, human, non-human and social capital, whether private and public. In the African worldview, a person who has enough but does not contribute meaningfully to community is not wealthy. However, a person who does not have enough but contributes meaningfully to community is a hero.⁷⁶

Significantly, both poverty and wealth are not individualistic tendencies but systemic and structural. Wealth, on one hand, involves those who control the collective endowments, knowledge, and cultural heritage of groups or nations. Jane Guyer asserts that in Africa, however, wealth is tied up to personality and extraordinary people, heroes, performers, spiritual adepts and craftsmen, and their charisma.⁷⁷ She includes the hunters who are blessed with luck and considers that as a spiritual form of wealth.⁷⁸ Hence, the non-material outcomes of productive processes such as social heritage and prestige play a role in determining wealth. That is to say wealth is defined within social dynamics and is fundamental to life itself. Such an idea is affirmed by Lewis Mumford who says that, "what we call wealth is in fact wealth only when it is a sign of potential or actual vitality."⁷⁹ There is no doubt, for instance, that cultural heritage and art, are indeed "priceless" and define the wealth of a people. Outside Africa, the Mona Lisa painted by Leonardo da Vinci was assessed at USD 100 million in 1962. However, the social dynamics and power-play by those who define wealth do not allow the

⁷⁶ Deme has argued cogently that in African epics, a hero is generally seen as the one who is able to use his or her unnatural powers to achieve extraordinary deeds and actions and is accountable for his/her personal actions. However, such a person must be the embodiment of the ideals of the society in which he or she lives. Such a person sets good examples and society looks up to that person with respect. See Mariam Konate Deme, "Heroism and the Supernatural in African Epic: Toward s Critical Analysis," *Journal of Black Studies* 39.3 (2009): 402-419.

⁷⁷ Jane I. Guyer, "Wealth in People and Self-Realization in Equatorial Africa," *Man* 28. 2(1993): 253.

⁷⁸ Guyer, "Wealth in People and Self-Realization in Equatorial Africa," 255.

⁷⁹ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 378.

“rich” cultural heritage of Africans to be seen as priceless. At best, African heritage has been considered as fetish or animistic and therefore has no value. In another vein, wealth connotes “happiness”, as seen from the Middle English *welo* as ‘well-being’, borrowed from West Germanic *welo*.⁸⁰ Poverty, on the other hand, is looked upon as arising from ill-luck and a cause of sadness. A poor person is less happy and cannot be lucky.

Among the Akan of Ghana, the word for wealth – *ahodze* – is a compound word: *aho* meaning “self/body”, and *dze* meaning “to possess/ possession”. Thus, to be wealthy means to possess the self. A wealthy person can carry one’s self about and possesses that which makes one capable to perform all tasks. Such a person does not depend on others; s/he has certain inalienable capacities and certain aspects of freedom and rights. Conversely, the Akan word for poverty – *ohia* – connotes something narrow, or small. It is that which prevents a person to move about freely or makes a person uneasy. It is that which affects the body to express itself. To be poor means inability to carry oneself. Thus the concept of poverty is linked to definitions of status and influence. “Poverty is more than the lack of income and resources to ensure a sustainable livelihood. Its manifestations include hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion as well as the lack of participation in decision-making.”⁸¹ While wealth is considered to thrive in relational terms, poverty is about loneliness. Poverty is also subject to systemic and social dynamics working between everyday life processes and the market forces. The poor does not have what it takes to participate in the dynamics of marketing.

Kofi Agyekum argues from the culturalist, structuralist, and fatalistic points of view that poverty is not a reality that is self-inflicting; an individual cannot be held responsible for being poor. He asserts that “poverty does not relate only to lack of money but also to lack of basic items, accusations, ill-luck, non-discrimination of food and accommodation, non-recognition of one’s potentials, lack of love for one’s spouse and non-befitting funerals.”⁸² Hence, a person can partly be blamed if others do not give him or her the place to play a role. Joseph Nijino avers that “Poverty is not merely lack of money; it goes beyond the pocket into the head! Poverty in Africa is a state of deprivation and includes other dimensions such as isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness,”⁸³ and Clement Majawa also says “Since poverty is

⁸⁰“wealth,” in http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=wealth. Date accessed June 12, 2019.

⁸¹ “Poverty” in <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/poverty/>

⁸² Kofi Agyekum, “The Ethnosemantics and Proverbs of Ohia, “Poverty” in Akan,” *Legon Journal of Humanities* 28.2 (2017): 44.

⁸³ Joseph Nijino, “Impact of Poverty on Sustainable Development in Africa,” *Theologies and Cultures* 4.2 (Dec 2007): 29.

not just lack of goods, it cannot be solved by merely rearranging wealth.”⁸⁴ This means that efforts aimed at eradicating poverty must not only focus on resources but also socio-cultural factors of relationship.

The social dynamics associated with poverty does not mean that Africans should blame non-Africans only for their poverty. Poverty breaks familial relationship and separates friends. The Akan believe that, *Ohia ye ya, ofiri fie, ommfiri abɔntenso* (lit. If poverty is bitter, it is from the home and not from outside).⁸⁵ The society to which one belongs greatly contributes in making people poor and exacerbating the plight of the poor. When relations close to a person look down on that individual, others get the opportunity to do likewise. It is the home or the immediate family that that makes the poor feel inferior.

Proverbs reveal the worldview of a people and how people should see the world. They do not simply demonstrate only the positive virtues of a people but also point out the relevant issues that undermine society. As moral and ethical systems, proverbs talk about good and evil, right and wrong. In the view of Lawrence Boakye, “Akan proverbs can be considered as useful teaching materials, a good language manual, and an instant insight into a given social, moral, or philosophical landscape of the society.”⁸⁶ A number of Akan proverbs, maxims and sayings, however, prove that Akans look down upon the poor and discriminate against them. The following examples show how society fails to see anything good coming from the poor and some ways in which society reacts to the poor:

- (1) *Ohia ma awiemfoɔ nyansa yera* (lit. Poverty makes a humble person’s wisdom vanish).⁸⁷
- (2) *Ohiani kyere kwae a, yennɔ* (lit. If a poor man shows an area of forest, we don’t cultivate it).⁸⁸
- (3) *Ohiani nim nyansa a, aka ne tirim* (lit. If a poor man knows wisdom, it is kept in his head).⁸⁹
- (4) “*Ahia me na hwe me*” *nti na obi ye akoo* (lit. To say “I am in need so look after me” is the reason why one becomes a slave).⁹⁰
- (5) *Se ihu de worotu obi fo a, ɔnnye hianyi a nna ɔye abofra* (lit. If you see a person being advised, if he is not a poor person, then he is a child).
- (6) *Ohia na ɔma akanni ye aboa* (lit. Poverty leads the Akan person to become a beast).

⁸⁴ Clement Majawa, “The Church’s Prophetic Role in the Struggle against Poverty in Africa,” *African Ecclesial Review* 40.5&6(1998): 263-264.

⁸⁵ Peggy Appiah, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Ivor Agyeman-Duah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans* (Oxfordshire, UK: Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited, 2007), 124

⁸⁶ Lawrence Boakye, “Akan Oral Tradition as Functional Epistemology in Scholarship, Social Change, and Development in Ghana,” in *Religion and Sustainable Development*, eds. George Ossom-Batsa, Nicoletta Gatti, and Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah (Citta del Vaticano: Urbaniana University Press, 2018), 35.

⁸⁷ Appiah et al, *Bu Me Be*, 123.

⁸⁸ Appiah et al, *Bu Me Be*, 124.

⁸⁹ Appiah et al, *Bu Me Be*, 124.

⁹⁰ Appiah et al, *Bu Me Be*, 122.

- (7) *Ohianyi begye dzin a, gyede nye nsa nom mu* (lit. If a poor person wants to become famous, it must be in drinking alcohol).

Examples (1), (2), and (3) reveal the view that the poor cannot contribute anything meaningful in conversation. Their dreams and suggestions will not be taken so it is better for them to keep their thoughts to themselves. Examples (4), (5), and (6) show how Akan society characterizes the poor as people with a lower status or non-human being. Poverty changes a person's status to become a child, slave or an animal.⁹¹ To be considered as an Akan person means to be accorded dignity. When such dignity is lost, one is dehumanized. The poor person, thus, cannot identify friends or foes. Saying (7) connotes that a poor person is known for being good in drinking alcohol. These proverbs demonstrate how the Akan must see the nature and effects of poverty, but they can also influence the necessary actions that must be taken against such dehumanizing tendencies.

It needs to be noted that the value of proverbs is not only to affirm the *status quo* but also to reveal attitudes and serve as a body of knowledge that fights attitudes which are counterproductive. In the words of Lechion Kimilike, proverbs “recognize and promote the otherwise dormant creative, critical and liberating potentials that can contribute enormously to sustainable development processes.”⁹² How then can the Akan develop rhetoric that seeks to empower and affirm the humanity of the poor if no such proverb exists? And what can theology offer in situations where the poor are not affirmed?

Ecclesiastes 9:13-18 and Affirmation of the Poor

Internal evidence from the Hebrew text shows that the book of Ecclesiastes is attributed to Qoheleth (1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10). As a wise person, Qoheleth points out the inequalities and discrimination in the world. He sees how the world looks down on children, youth (4:13; 10:16), and the poor (4:13; 9:15). Their identities and talents are not rewarded or protected, and Qoheleth “suggests a new set of guidelines that dismantles obsessive practices based on the presumption that such a path will lead to full knowledge and abundant reward.”⁹³

Ecclesiastes 9:13-18 is made up of two movements: a parable (vv13-16) and two maxims (vv 17-18). In the first movement, Qoheleth uses a tragic parable to show how the

⁹¹ For similar idea, see Agyekum, “The Ethnosemantics and Proverbs of Ohia, “Poverty” in Akan,” 32,33.

⁹² Lechion Peter Kimilike, *Poverty in the Book of Proverbs: An African Transformational Hermeneutic of Proverbs on Poverty, Bible and Theology in Africa*, 7 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 147.

⁹³ William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 179.

creative energies of the poor are of no value in this world. The parable tells of how a little city was besieged by a great king, and the attack was so great in proportion to the strength of the little city. It took the wise plan of a poor man of that little city to overcome the great siege of the great king (v 15a). In normal circumstances, a great siege would have brought fear and panic among the population, and it would have taken a lot of sacrifices from the strong, brave and powerful to stand against it. When such a great attack is foiled, it would attract lots of jubilation. In that scenario, it took the sacrifice, bravery, strength, and wisdom of a poor man of that small city to defeat the attack of a great king. In fact, to imagine that a poor person in a small city can achieve a great thing is unthinkable, for the Akan say, *anoma biara suar a, no buw so suar* (lit. If a bird is small, its nest would be small). It is assumed that as long as one stays in a small city, that person cannot do great things. However, that was not the case. Since it was a poor man who chalked that victory over the great siege, “no one remembered that poor man” (v 15b). Such a climax of the parable is a letdown. Some have argued that the poor but wise man did not actually save the city but rather knew how to save the city. Yet his advice was rejected and not even solicited.⁹⁴ If this assertion is anything to go by, then it also confirms that the advice of a poor man is rejected. In all, Craig Bartholomew observes that “three things are at play here in the periscope: the poor not attended to after delivering the city (v. 15); the wisdom of the poor despised; and the words of the poor ignored (v. 16).”⁹⁵

The poor man has done something worthy of praise in a small city. Within the context of a small city, all would expect to hear what the poor man has contributed or done. His success will be the talk of the town. Could it be that this city does not honour its poor, recognize them, let alone reward them? Africans, through Agenda 2063, know that society can create opportunities for poor people to rise above their poverty to become persons of honour. It extols values of equality, human rights and inclusion. Interestingly, the poor man in the text was wise. Qoheleth primarily aims at praising the value of wisdom and exalt it above all virtues in his writing, although he recognizes that it does not give any advantage. For Qoheleth, even though wisdom is not appreciated or heeded, it was still better than strength (v 16). Qoheleth, however, sees the example of the poor wise man as something that is impressive (v 13). Such recognition speaks a lot and serves as a lesson for those who want to do the right thing. The valuable contributions of the poor must not go unnoticed.

⁹⁴ C Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation, Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 310; James Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, Old Testament Literature (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 167; R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), 247; David A. Hubbard and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, The Preacher's Commentary Series, 16 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1991), 210.

⁹⁵ Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 314.

The second movement (vv 17-18) gives two maxims concerning wisdom. First, the quiet words of the wise are more worthy than the loud sayings of a foolish king. Here, value is placed on action more than words; what a quiet disposition can do, noise cannot do. Second, the value of wisdom is more than weapons of war. That is to say, it is not profitable to spend all energies on acquiring weapons of war when wisdom is lacking. Perhaps Qoheleth is of the view that society sometimes lean towards folly than wisdom and that would lead to the wrong use of weapons of war. Africans must spend more resources on promoting wisdom than on weapons of war. Another moral from the maxims is that society should not cherish the strong over the poor and folly over wisdom. It should give honour to those who deserve it, and praise to whom it belongs. There are instances where the poor can do more than what the rich and the strong can do in bringing harmony to society. The maxims also echo the story of Joseph who suffered a similar fate when he was in prison but had the wisdom to interpret a dream that helped the King's butler to get out of jail. In fact, Joseph had hoped and even reminded the butler to remember him, but the butler totally forgot about Joseph (Gen 40:14, 23). In the case of Joseph, the chief cupbearer ultimately remembered him making his long stay in prison, as Gordon Wenham would put it, "prove to be a steppingstone to the palace."⁹⁶

In all, Ecclesiastes 9:13-18 is a parable that seeks to unsettle popular assumption and challenge all to rethink where we place our values. Amy Plantinga-Pauw contends that "The hearer of the parable expecting to have her assumptions about the benefits of wisdom reinforced is left disconcerted and saddened."⁹⁷ The truth is that human beings are ungrateful. To expect them to acknowledge the good things done is unnecessary. This means that the poor who are wise should not be downhearted when they are not acknowledged. Nonetheless, being grateful is virtue and that can be the driving force for an inclusive and prosperous nation.

Acknowledging the Poor in the Christian Church

Agenda 2063 is a holistic development strategy for long term development. It requires everyone to play a part in the whole scheme of events. Since its review in 2018, it has become increasingly clear that religious bodies and civil organizations have remained on the sidelines of such sustainable development. Not all have been included in the quest for the Africa we want. However, development without religion is not holistic, because African interpretations of life are essentially from a religious perspective. To break this long-term project into short

⁹⁶ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Texas: Word Books, 1994), 385.

⁹⁷ Amy Plantinga-Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 196.

term goals, religious institutions must know what they can do. What then can the church contribute in the short term to promote the Africa we want?

First, Agenda 2063 must follow a bottom-up approach. The commitment of the political leaders alone is not enough; there must be the commitment of all. The populace must own the policies to appreciate what each person does, and recognize what each one can contribute to the growth and development of society. A bottom-up approach would enable the poor to have a voice in what they want and a hand in how it happens. In Africa's political structures, the executives, legislature, judiciary and the media are mostly recognized as occupying the top hierarchy of society. Incidentally, the church in Africa is also poor and is not counted when development is discussed. It is therefore facing serious challenges in becoming a force to reckon with in society. Nevertheless, the church continues to play key roles in national development by building schools, hospitals and supporting the needy. Conflict resolution has been the hallmark of the African church. It therefore, needs to explore ways to influence society from the bottom-up as it battles with identity and poverty itself. Since the UN has found it necessary to consider religious bodies in its planning, it has become imperative that the African church finds ways to recognize the poor who are always with us.

Within itself, the church hardly creates spaces of honour for the poor and lacks the capacity to involve them.⁹⁸ The church should not be seen to be an oppressive tool but rather a space for growth. The tension between being a community of hope to the poor and a community where only the prosperous are counted cannot be overlooked. Religious and theological educators must focus on helping the church stand out and propose remedies, and advocate against the discrimination of the poor so that the church can become part of the development process. Theological education must serve as a steppingstone for elevation and inclusiveness. It must design curricula that prepares students to bring out the good in them and make them contribute meaningfully to society.

Second, the Africa we want can be possible if attempts are made to reflect on worldviews that are self-dehumanizing and inimical to some sections of the society. We cannot afford to be our own enemies. Hence, the church must reflect and examine African proverbs and thought forms that lend themselves to unhealthy ideologies. As Kimilike avers, "poverty proverbs thus serve the role of enabling the poor to know and acknowledge their difficult situation so as to foster initiatives to eradicate it."⁹⁹ The initiatives to eradicate poverty must

⁹⁸ P. Verster, "A Church with the Poor – Lessons from Scripture and from Congregations in Informal Settlements," *Acta Theologica*, Supplement 16 (2012): 72.

⁹⁹ Kimilike, *Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 147.

be a concern for theological educators who must therefore help the church and society to cultivate the right kind of language and attitudes that look at the poor with respect. Theology must dig deep into cultural resources to unearth ideologies which can promote the well-being of society.

Third, it has been argued that Akan perspectives of the poor help to exacerbate the conditions of the poor. This means that the church must not look far or blame others for the woes of the poor since our own attitudes are a contributing factor. Although cultural, structural, and fatal factors like unjust economic systems, slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and bad leadership are contributing to the problems of poverty, hermeneutical interpretations on prosperity within the body of Christ also plays a key role. The church should not look to the wealthy with pride and count the poor as inferior. The church cannot preach prosperity messages that make a section of the people rejected, debased, and dependent, and breed feelings of low self-esteem and injustice. In the words of Auza,

The strength of religions and their cooperation to foster peaceful and inclusive societies essential for development rests on their capacity to raise and nurture prophets and builders who are able to inspire concrete action, develop rapport of immediacy with individuals and communities, and rally people to work together for something greater than themselves.¹⁰⁰

That is to say, the church's theology must be redesigned especially on prosperity to affirm the dignity of the poor. On one end of prosperity theology is that poverty is a curse and the Christian must break from all that makes a person poor. On the other end is that the poor has something meaningful to contribute to the well-being of society if not wealth. Moji Ruele has explained that prosperity theology is not just about wealth but also about health and well-being.¹⁰¹ The emphasis on blessings and the fact that God has good plans for all must be understood not merely in terms of abundance of resources but also in being useful to community. Prosperity messages that focus only on money have somehow made the poor in the church pretend to be "rich". They make young people live beyond their means and make people strive to be rich at whatever cost. Paul cautions Christians that "If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves" (Gal 6:3). Pretense is not a good

¹⁰⁰ Auza, "Religion and Sustainable Development Goals," 12

¹⁰¹ Moji Ruele, "The Prosperity Gospel and Economic Growth in African Christianity," in *Anthology of African Christianity*, Regnum Studies in Global Christianity, eds., Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner, Chammah Kaunda and Kennedy Owino (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2016), 1016.

virtue hence each person must know who he or she is. One of the empowering proverbs that the poor can hold on to is: *se hianyi dze noho frafra adehye mu, ɔnkyer na no ho ada ho* (Lit. If a poor person mixes with royals, it would not take time for him to be exposed). While this proverb seeks to show how the poor can be exposed, it implicitly enjoins the royals to protect the poor. This means the rich and notable people of the have a responsibility to bring up the poor. If the poor are to gain the recognition they deserve, the church must brace itself to speak against all forms of discrimination and ensure that structures are put in place to empower the people to have access to justice, freedom and peace. Both the poor and the rich must be united in one purpose to build Africa.

Fourth, the Africa we want cannot be achieved if few opportunities are given to the vulnerable, little contributions are welcome, and minimal abilities are too small. The Akan hold that, *ketewa biara nsua* (lit. a little is not small). Theology must engage the thoughts of all – scholarly or non-scholarly readers, church or society, rich or poor. There is the need for collective participation and affirmation, and to harness the strengths of all persons. Issues about the poor are about “what is small and what is great, what is important and what is unimportant, and what is valued and what is unvalued,”¹⁰² and this calls for radical approaches to how we see the poor.

In Africa, the opportunities that come the way of the poor, women and children are taken over by the rich and powerful. Educational scholarships for the underprivileged are usually taken over by the rich for their children. Ironically, knowledge and intelligence of the highly educated are not counted by politicians. It seems in Africa sound knowledge, innovations, discoveries and findings in academia are stored in archives and never consulted. Could it be that those in academia and arts fall under the category of the poor that must be redeemed? African Theology must speak about how the poor can have access to education, and how the knowledge of the educated can make an impact in society.

The Africa we want should not be a society that falls for political leaders who promise but cannot fulfil. It should not be where achievements, intellectual properties and cultural heritage are disregarded while comedy is hailed. It should not be where corruption thrives and hard work pays little. It must not give room for a section of people while the poor are trampled upon and unjust practices fall on deaf ears. It should not be where one’s status is measured in terms of wealth, the number of wives, children, livestock and size of land the person possesses. It should not be where the youth are seen as unwise, and the unmarried do not have anything

¹⁰² Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 362.

good to contribute to society. It should not be where theological education and the church make its adherents more oppressed and bound to the philosophies of the powerful. It should be where right relationships promote growth, and each one helps the other to lift up the hand.

Finally, the Christian church needs a new approach to ministry that is not just focused on giving aid to the poor but more on changing the attitude of people about the poor. It must also fight for a place in the developmental agenda. Madipoane Masenya has intimated that “The powerless however need to be reminded that in our struggle to maintain our integrity motivated by our sense of agency, we need to fight in such a way that our integrity as persons in our own right is not tampered with negatively either by circumstances or by those more powerful than us.”¹⁰³This means that theological discourses must show how the church can position itself, showing what they can do, and contribute to the general wellbeing of society. The poor are not to be placed at the receiving end but at the giving end where they are encouraged to give their best to complement what the wealthy are giving. The church must take its rightful place in society. Situations of poverty must call for creativity and innovations. They call for wisdom to fight not weapons.

Theology must find new ways to educate the poor in Africa to cultivate self-worth and not think that since their contributions are not acknowledged, they will not do anything to help society. The church has a duty to help the poor and build up their capacities, creating a society where the men, the old and the powerful have a duty to acknowledge the women, the young and the poor, and help them build up their capacities. As Strafford Wright says, it would have been right for the poor man in the text of Ecclesiastes to volunteer and help even if he knows that his fellow citizens would not ask for his advice in the future.¹⁰⁴ If Africans refuse what others want us to be, we can be what we want to be.

Conclusion

This paper has considered how the church in its theological discourses can contribute to Agenda 2063 that aims at poverty reduction, focuses on all African people, and calls for collaboration so that all can see the Africa we want. It has observed that the aspirations of Agenda 2063 look forward to a situation where all (great or small) contributions, creativities and innovations of every African (rich or poor) are fully recognized, affirmed and harnessed

¹⁰³ Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), “Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness: Rereading the Naomi-Ruth Story in African-South Africa,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 120 (Nov 2004): 59.

¹⁰⁴ J Strafford Wright, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the NIV: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 1184.

for the benefit of society. It has shown how the church can contribute to ending all forms of marginalization, inequalities and discrimination. From the Akan proverbs, society does not give recognition to what the poor say or do. There are hardly any proverbs that seek to empower the poor. Likewise in Ecclesiastes, there is an instance where the contribution of a poor man who chalked a victory over the great siege or gave advice that could help overcome the great attack was not remembered. The African church must teach society to think along empowering the vulnerable. Counterproductive views must be a concern for theological educators. Africa's Agenda 2063, like the SDGs and MDGs, recognizes the role the church can play in collaborating to transform society. Such recognition has motivated this discussion into giving five proposals for the Christian church which include a bottom-up approach and a call to reflect and reexamine Akan proverbs that are dehumanizing and inimical to the growth of society. The use of proverbs is not only to acknowledge facts of life but also to serve as pedagogical tools and shape attitudes which are counterproductive.

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