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# No Place for Abortion in African Traditional Life - Some Reflections

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## Introduction

I read with dismay some articles regarding abortion or Termination of Pregnancy (TOP), promoted in some of the hospitals in South Africa, especially under the direction of Professor Joum van Bogaert and collaborators/providers. From the description in the articles shows clearly that the processes some women go through are not only agonizing and horrifying, physiologically, socially, psychologically, but are bound to have enduring negative effects on the patients, the nurses and society at large. And reacting to this situation I want to offer a few reflections. My reflections are mainly based on the work of two African scholars, namely: Professor John S. Mbiti, a Kenyan (see MBITI, J. S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, London, 1985, *passim*); and Laurenti Magesa, from Tanzania. (see MAGESA, L., *African Religion: the Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1997, *passim*).

First of all, I want to begin by emphasizing that those doctors and their collaborators who assist in the termination of pregnancies have no justification whatsoever. Two areas are clear: that every human person has the right to life, is clear from the Human Rights Declaration. In addition, Holy Scripture, and Church Tradition have always emphasized the sacredness of life, and the dignity of each and every human being. Hence, from the point of view of Christianity, and the Church's stand, abortion must be condemned in the strongest terms possible. No one, has the right to put an end to human life, although the loss of life may be allowed, but only in extraordinary circumstances.

I wish, however, to approach the rest of the reflections from the point of view of what I may call pre-Christianity African religious beliefs and practices on the subject of abortion. My stand is that there is no place for abortion even in pre-Christianity African tradition. Here is why:

### 1- African Society's Love for Children

It is popularly known, and almost taken for granted, that in traditional Africa, even before the coming of Christianity, children were highly valued in society. This does not mean that there were no situations of abuse; there were cases

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where children were mistreated and neglected. The worst is in reference to the birth of twins. “The birth of twins and triplets is an event out of the ordinary. Therefore, in many African societies twins and triplets are treated with fear or special care. Formerly, some societies used to kill such children; others killed both the mother and the children. This, however, was not the universal practice, for other societies greeted the birth of twins with great joy and satisfaction, as a sign of rich fertility.” (MBITI, J. S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 117; see MAGESA, L., *African Religion: the Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, pp. 146-148). All in all, the fact is that children were, and are still, seen as precious.

## 2- Marriage and Procreation

We must note that marriage and procreation in African communities are a unity: without procreation marriage is incomplete. ((MBITI, J. S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 133). Pregnancy is the first indication that a new member is on the way. The expectant mother becomes, therefore, a special person and receives special treatment from her neighbors and relatives. This special treatment starts before and continues after child-birth. In some African societies, marriage is not fully consummated until the wife has given birth. For this reason, there is general abhorrence of barrenness in most African societies. “Unhappy is the woman who fails to get children for, whatever other qualities she might possess, her failure to bear children is worse than committing genocide: she has become the dead end of human life, not only for the genealogical line but also for herself”(MBITI, J. S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 110)

## 3- Children as Survival of Race and Assurance of Personal Immortality

As we indicated above, when a woman that has not given birth to a child dies, in the eyes of African society there will be nobody of her own immediate blood to ‘remember’ her, to keep her in the state of personal immortality: she will simply be ‘forgotten’. (MBITI, J. S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 110). Therefore, a child not only continues the physical line of life, in some societies thought to be a re-incarnation of the departed, but becomes the intensely religious focus of keeping the parents in their state of personal immortality. (MBITI, J. S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 120) A person who, therefore, has no descendants in effect quenches the fire of life, and becomes forever dead since his line of physical continuation is blocked if he does not get married and bear children. This is a sacred understanding and obligation which must neither be abused nor despised. (MBITI, J. S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 133).

## 4- Polygamy as Search for Children

Getting married to two or more wives is a custom found all over Africa, though in some societies it is less common than in others. The custom fits well into the social structure of traditional life, and into the thinking of the people, serving many useful purposes, one of which is the search for children. If the philosophical or theological attitude towards marriage and procreation is that these are an aid towards the partial recapture or attainment of the lost immortality (that is after the withdrawal of God to the heavens - a kind of ‘Fall’ of man), the more wives a man has the more children he is likely to have, and the more children the stronger the power of ‘immortality’ in the family. He who has many descendants has the strongest possible manifestation of ‘immortality’, he is ‘reborn’ in the multitude of his descendants, and there are many who ‘remember’ him after he has died physically and entered his ‘personal immortality’. Such a man has the attitude that ‘the more we are, the bigger I am’. Children are the glory of marriage, and the more there are of them the greater the glory. (MBITI, J.

S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 142, cfr. p. 98)

### 5- Communal Responsibility over Children's Well-being

The birth of a child is, moreover, the concern not only of the parents but of many relatives, including the living and the departed. For it is the community which must protect the child, feed it, bring it up, educate it, and in many other ways incorporate it into the wider community. The child cannot be exclusively 'my child' but only 'our child'. "Children are the buds of society, and every birth is the arrival of 'spring' when life shoots out and the community thrives," writes Professor John S. Mbiti (MBITI, J. S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, p.110; see also MAGESA, L., *African Religion: the Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, p. 83). In this kind of setup, there are no children left abandoned. Even those children born out of wedlock, have a place in society; many a family are willing to welcome such children and look after them.

### 6- Taboos and Rituals for the Preservation of the Children's Life

In the background of wanting to have as many children as possible, perhaps, lies the desire to save some, especially in the face of rampant infant mortality. Because of many sicknesses, and due to lack of proper medical facilities, a lot of families lost children in their earliest years of infancy. By producing many children, therefore, a family would save at least three or four, out of a family of ten. And in order to preserve the life of a baby, many taboos and rituals surround the whole period from conception to the birth of the new baby. For instance, according to the African mentality, "If conception is an occasion of joy, a good, uncomplicated birth of a healthy child is much more so as it validates the relationships [existing between the parents, the nearest of kin, the ancestors and God Himself]. It is a sign of tranquility in the universe, the pleasure of the ancestors, the good moral standing of the parents, and a sigh of the defeat of bad people or malevolent spirits by the protection of the ancestors" (MAGESA, L., *African Religion: the Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, p. 84). For that matter, the parents must observe strict discipline, during the period when the mother is expecting; and they must be in good moral standing if the birth is to take place smoothly...Both parents must be faithful to each other during the entire pregnancy. "Unfaithfulness of one or the other spouse, or an incestuous relationship, is sure to result in a difficult delivery, stillbirth, birth of an abnormal child, or death of the child before it has been "taken out" and formally named" (MAGESA, L., *African Religion: the Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, p. 85). With reference to the people of western Kenya, Gunter Wagner explains that "A miscarriage which occurs suddenly and without causing much pain to the woman is regarded as the consequence of an act of adultery committed by the wife during her pregnancy... Suspicions of adultery are also raised if parturition occurs too soon (after seven or eight months) or if the child is stillborn" ( WAGNER, G., *The Bantu of Western Kenya: With Special Reference to the Vugusu and Logoli*. Vol. I, London, Oxford University Press, 1949, p. 297. If there were such taboos, plus elaborate ritual, and if miscarriage was not tolerated, then abortion had no place.

### 7- The Mystique of Life, and Harmony in African Religion

The foundation and purpose of the ethical perspective of Africa Religion is life, life in its fullness. Everything is perceived with reference to this. It is no wonder, then, Africans quickly draw ethical conclusions about thoughts, words, and actions of human beings, or even of "natural" cosmological events, by asking questions such as: Does the particular happening promote life? If so, it is good, just, ethical, desirable, divine. Or does it diminish life in any way? Then it is wrong, bad, unethical,

unjust, detestable. This most basic understanding of morality in African Religion or tradition is incorporated systematically in people's way of life. It is expressed in their traditions, ceremonies, and rituals. It constitutes what Africans perceive as the mystique of life. (MAGESA, L., African Religion: the Moral Traditions of Abundant Life, p. 77).

Similarly, for Africans harmony, as the principle for moral order does not mean that people and other members of creation lose their freedom. Harmony is the agent of freedom and is meant to enhance it. But what does "freedom" mean? Does it imply license or liberty to do whatever one wants? Such is not the case. In African Religion or tradition, freedom is what enables a person to be fully who he or she is. This applies equally to all beings: harmony (or freedom) enables a tree to be fully a tree, a stone fully a stone, and a person fully human. (MAGESA, L., African Religion: the Moral Traditions of Abundant Life, p. 74).

### Conclusion

With the above background, it is only natural to see why abortion has no place in African Religion and traditional society. Admittedly, "Abortion is an emotive issue -- cultural and religious values have always made it taboo - until five years ago it was a criminal offence in this country. And although the law may have changed, attitudes haven't," write Ruda Landman and Kate Barry in their report, "DIY Abortion Clinics," June 23, 2002. It is not surprising also that the nurses and the majority of the medical staff, "want nothing to do with [Termination of Pregnancy (TOP) or abortion], even if they're on duty in the ward." The biggest survey ever done amongst doctors showed that more than 80% of South African doctors are against abortion on demand. The government was fully aware of this attitude when they forced the members of the African National Congress (ANC) to vote against their consciences in support of "Termination of Pregnancy". They should therefore not be surprised when only 5 of the 27 hospitals in Mpumalanga have staff who are willing to take part in abortions.

At any rate, keeping in mind the Gospel values, the Church's teaching, the Declaration of Human Rights, and the rich religious-cultural background, the medical staff in any hospital, clinic, health center or dispensary, must not be coerced against their conscience to take part in abortion or contraception. Moreover, considering all the suffering that many people endured during the dark days of apartheid, the South African Government, and the people of South Africa ought to be the first ones to oppose all the attitudes and practices that are anti-life. Please, please, Africa has suffered enough, let her children live!