

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **The trajectories of culture, Christianity and socio-economic development in Vihiga District, Western Kenya**

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**Culture is part and parcel of a community's life irrespective of the repelling forces or demands from other social institutions, including the Church. However, some scholars have argued that the Church is a culture in itself (Clapp, 1996: 84). Subsequently, it should be considerate of other cultures around it. If the diverse cultures conflict due to the differing cultural views from the different groups, then 'cultural wars' are bound to emerge. The paper elaborates on the effects of harmonious existence of diverse culture to development as compared to the effects of conflicting cultures. The study was situated in Vihiga district of Western Kenya; a district with over 50 Christian denominations, besides other religious faiths. Only seven churches identified through purposive sampling formed the study group. One of the findings of the study was that, the consequences of defying churches' cultures are manifested in the form of formation of independent movements in Africa commonly described as "places to feel at home" where people can practice their cultures without hindrances. This is an indicator of Christian diversity which has affected development both positively and negatively.**

**Key words:** Culture, Christianity, socio-economic, development.

## **INTRODUCTION**

When interrelating the concepts religion, culture and development, it is believed that one will have a positive or negative impact on the others. For example, when the postmodern theories of development are emphasized, they are likely to affect and/or influence both negative and positive culture. On the other hand, negative aspects of culture are likely to affect the development processes. Religion in its own rights may condemn cultural practices, and vice versa. In such a complex scenario, do Christian groups and especially the Church leaders have any significant role to play in streamlining the issues of culture and development? Has the Christian Church been a player in the promotion or hindrance of cultural issues, especially the traditional beliefs and practices? Are the churches condemning such issues in favour of westernized/post modern spiritual and economic development theories? Are there cultural milieus that the church cannot completely eliminate from the society, which persist to slow the development processes? To answer these questions, the field research purposively Vihiga district (Kenya has 8

provinces which are sub-divided into districts, and districts divided further into divisions) that harbour three different dialects of the Luhya tribe (second largest ethnic community in Kenya) so as to make an analysis of effects of culture on development, as well as delve into the role of religion in the arenas of culture and development.

The main objective of the study therefore was to examine some of the cultural practices that either negatively or positively contribute to socio-economic development and at the same time evaluate the role of the churches in people's cultural practices. The major assumption of the study was that the people in the sampled districts are believed to strongly hold on to their cultural beliefs and practices and this has either positively or negatively affected development activities.

## **CONCEPTS**

Culture is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that

characterize a society or a social group. It includes modes of life, the fundamental rights of human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs (Serageldin, 1994: 18). Lints (1993: 103) corroborates with this view by emphatically noting that culture is the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human and handed down from generation to generation. Other scholars have accentuated that culture is the organization of human beings into permanent groups and can only be maintained if humanity divert large part of their efforts to the work of conservation (Niebuhr, 1951: 33; Clapp, 1996: 94-97). A culture of one social grouping or a society is most likely to be different from the other. It is therefore illogical to talk of culture as a monolithic subject, thus culture with Capital (C). This is because of the diverse nature of people's way of living and consequently different beliefs and practices.

The broader definition of culture addresses society's institutions, its legal systems, its processes of governance, legitimating and participation, intricate links and transactions that define a society's character as well as delimit patterns of economic developments (Serageldin, 1994: 2). In the context of this work, culture refers to a people's 'traditional' beliefs and practices that have persisted as part and parcel of people's lives for long. The persistence goes on irrespective of the demands from other social institutions, including religious groups as well as development thinkers and practitioners. The word "tradition" in the context of this work implies 'native' or 'indigenous', that is, that which has not been imported from other places. It is believed that some of the natives have held on to tradition whether it negatively affects other people in the community or not. The persistence of these cultural issues is consequently believed to have affected development either negatively or positively.

The role of Christian groups in this Vihiga District in this endeavour remains relevant as far as arguments on "Christ within Culture", "Christ against Culture", and "Christ above Culture" are propagated by Niebuhr (1951). "Christ above culture" is an argument that has been raised by most mainstream churches especially those that trace their origin and spread from first missionary activity in their various countries. An example of such churches is the Roman Catholic Church. The argument here is that Christ's knowledge and power surpasses all other cultural authorities and for this reason, the Church should not be a partisan in cultural activities and ceremonies.

"Christ Against Culture's" argument is that Christ as the author of Christianity is against cultural observances and those who practice such should not be considered as 'those of the faith'. In this particular debate, whatever may be the customs of the society in which Christians live, and whatever the human achievements it conserves, Christ is seen as opposed to them, so that He confronts men with the challenge of "either-or" decision (Niebuhr,

1951: 40). Churches that take this stand have abandoned wholly the customs and institutions of so-called 'heathen' societies, since Christ is against culture.

In "Christ Within Culture", argumentatively, Christ seems to accommodate all people irrespective of their family background, their cultural contexts as well as their weaknesses. This is the argument advanced mostly in African Independent Church movements which can also be referred to as New Religious Movements. To them, Jesus appears as a great hero of Human cultural history. To Niebuhr, the argument here affirms that Jesus' teachings are regarded as the greatest human achievement since he confirms what is best in the past and guides the process of civilization to its proper goal. He is a part of culture in the sense that he himself is part of the social heritage that must be transmitted and conserved, thus, "Christ of Culture".

"Development" discussed herein focuses on a positive shift of indicators of socio-economic progress. This form of development takes into account the basic needs of the people; such as food, shelter, clothing, education, family/identity/security, and health, among others. This form of development may not significantly contribute to the growth of Gross National Domestic Product (GNDP), but is mostly relevant because it takes care of people's immediate needs, especially at the community's grassroots.

These concepts are reflected in the theoretical discussion that follows hereunder, from reviewed scholarly works, to provide an orientation to frame this paper.

## **THEORETICAL CONCEPTION**

Culture as Lints (1993: 103) explains is the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of people and handed down from generation to generation. Culture gives the context from which we see and the categories by which we see and classify. Other scholars have argued that culture is the organization of human beings into permanent groups and can only be maintained if humanity devote large part of their efforts to the work of conservation (Niebuhr, 1951: 33, 37; Clapp, 1996: 94-97). Culture is a central part of people's lives. It is also dynamic hanging and sensitive. It is usually poorly understood by outsiders, often abused, manipulated, ignored and treated as an excuse or residual explanation either for why anything or conversely, nothing can be done. Though scholars of cultural studies are aware of the effects of misinterpreting people's cultures, there is a need to expound this from first hand experience in some of the areas believed to have strong cultural attachments. When people participate in decision-making they bring with them their own knowledge about how their culture and social system can contribute, adapt to, and advance change. There are variety of ways in which people

participate in decision making in their local communities in directly productive activities and their national settings as well (Bryant, 1994: 450-458).

A pressing dilemma of nation building and local development in most African countries has been how to resolve the tension between on one hand, preserving and building of ethnic identities that have evolved over many years and provide the cultural resources needed for political, economic and social development, and on the other hand, transcending the cleavages of ethnic identification that tend to impede the realization of national unity and integration. Such a process starts from the community local levels (Bryant, 1994: 69). The study intends to examine whether church's development process have adopted policies that appreciate indigenous/cultural content to accommodate itself to the values, interests, aspirations and social institutions, which are important in the life of the people (Klitgaard, 1994:78). Echoing these ideas are the words of Shorter (1998: 29) who opines that human societies and cultures are not static. They are constantly changing. All human societies and cultures are subject to regular internal change. Change in this case may be radical but it is seldom total. In other words, there are continuities and discontinuities. In another book, Shorter (1997: 242) explains that in purely secular terms, culture is relevant to socio-economic development. In the culturally heterogeneous countries of Africa, social integration is prerequisite for nation building. To Shorter, cultural differences and antagonisms account for many of the structural and organizational weaknesses of these countries. Development programmes have also ignored socio cultural factors at their peril, and social upheavals have resulted which have brought lasting damage and unhappiness. Shorter therefore recommends that socio-cultural integration needs to be promoted as well as fostering a pride in indigenous culture, which will motivate the citizens and stimulate cooperation with people of other traditions. What Shorter and other scholars do not seem to recognize is that there also exist negative cultures which in most cases disrupt the unity of the people instead of enhancing the same.

Niebuhr (1951: 38) emphasizes that the values a culture seeks to realize in any time or place are many in number. No society can try to realize all its manifold possibilities; each is highly complex, made up of many institutions with many goals and interweaving interests. Moreover, I corroborate with Niebuhr when he emphatically explains that each and individual persons have their special claims and interests; and everyone in his individuality is a complex being with desires of body and mind, with self regarding and other regarding motives, with good and bad relations to other human beings, nature and supernatural beings. Consequently, even if economic or biological interpretations of culture are maintained still all that can be claimed is that economic or biologic values are fundamental, while the vast superstructure of other

interests must be recognized.

Lints (1993: 118) notes that beyond the limits of our native structures of belief, we are all subject to cultural influences that further define the sort of things we consider plausible to believe. These plausible structures may be an essential part of the fabric of a culture, defining acceptable ranges of beliefs for both individuals and institutions. Lints further relates culture and the Christian gospel by stating:

“The gospel in its fundamental thrust swims against the tide of culture in many ways. Cultural thoughts reject its supernaturalism as implausible and dismiss many of its moral demands as quaint repugnant. Part of the task of the evangelical theologian is to lay bare the fundamental assumptions of a culture – assumptions that characteristically go unnoticed by that culture – and relate these to the principles of rationality or tradition that under girds the gospel (pp. 118-189)”.

These conflicts between the two traditions can therefore not be underestimated especially in their contribution (either negative or positive) towards people's spiritual, economic, social, political and cultural development. The Church does not live in utopia and neglecting a people's cultures at any given time and place only results into regrettable outcome. How the churches are involved in cultural debates and conflict resolution is an agenda to be tackled in the practical analysis of this paper.

To Myers (1999: 57), development that transforms people seeks to respond to the needs of the poor in a holistic manner. It seeks to follow Christ in the way he went about doing his ministry, encompassing physical, spiritual, social and cultural dimensions of personal and societal life. This kind of development challenges people and communities to define their own vision and manage and own the development process as planners, implementers, evaluators and change agents themselves. It also enables them to recognize their abilities to free themselves from cultural, social and spiritual bondage that causes them to remain in poverty, oppression and unjust relationships. The explanation that lacks in Myer's elaboration is how positive cultures should be enhanced and how negative cultures should be attenuated.

Kraft (1980: 86) observes that socio culturally, the high degree of human commonality in biological, psychological and spiritual realms is expressed in the development and maintenance of human society and culture. Biologically, the need for such necessities as food, shelter and air requires that each culture provide for the continuous obtaining of these biological necessities. If it is not the case, then the culture is negative and fails. Likewise, at the psychological level, culture must provide for a measure of meaning in life, personal security, psychological integration, some degree of freedom and whatever other psychological needs human beings have.

Spiritually, all cultures provide explanations of and responses to beings and/or powers beyond the biological and psychological. To Kraft therefore, culture responds to the human needs by providing things such as the organization of social activity, communication, social control and the indoctrination of succeeding generations in the cultural system. Subsequently, we would like to find out how the cultural activities have organized the lives of the people in the areas of our focus. Is culture an impediment or a promoter of development activities in these communities?

Myers (1999: 71) notes that local churches must join the community in overcoming the bondage of poverty. He emphasizes:

“The church becomes flesh of the people flesh and bone of its bone. It enters into the life of the community and becomes partners with the community uniting in addressing that community’s needs. That means that the church allows the people of that community to instruct it as it identifies with the people. It respects those people and perceives them as being people of great wisdom and potential. It recognizes the people who in the final analysis have the capability to change the community and to deal with its problems are the people of the community”.

If Myers views about the Christian Church were to be employed, what role then do Christian groups in our area of focus play in incorporating people’s cultures into the development process? Does the Church allow herself to interact with the cultures of the people or does it carelessly condemn people’s cultural expressions without a keen analysis of the effects of the condemnation to people and the development process?

## STUDY FOCUS

The interplay of the three concepts, that is, culture, religion and development, is the core focus of this study. Every region has cultural manifestations that strike deep responsive chords in the lives of the people. These chords may be destructive or constructive. On the other hand, the development procedures of the people may depend on these cultural issues for either effectual or ineffectual impact to the community members. The study presupposed that lack of development (depicted by negative shift of indicators) results from negative cultural practices. Another assumption of the study was that religion (Christianity) has not effectively played its vital role in streamlining the cultural issues that are believed to negatively affect development because the two cultures of, the Church and traditional customs have always contrasted. (Niebuhr, 1951: 38-39) emphasizes the need for culture to commensurate peace and with prosperity, justice with order, freedom with welfare, truth with beauty,

among others but is hesitant to point out the negative cultures which delineate these harmonious factors. This is a lacuna of knowledge that the study sought to fill. From the assumptions and some noted scholarly gaps, the study answers some pertinent questions including:

- (a) How do the people’s cultural beliefs and practices affect development?
- (b) What are some of the indices that show either positive or negative effects of culture on people’s development?
- (c) Are there churches that accommodate some ‘negative’ cultural practices?

From these questions, the study generally examined the effects of cultural images on development and at the same time evaluated the role of religion on cultural issues that affect development. Specifically the research aimed at:

- (a) Investigating some of the cultural practices that either negatively or positively contributes to development.
- (b) Examining the implication of cultural practices to Churches’ development activities.
- (c) Evaluating the role played by the church in people’s cultural practices.

## SCOPE AND METHODS

The research was done in Vihiga district of Western Kenya. It focused on the efforts of Church of God (COG), Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAG), Catholic Church, the Friends Church, African Israel Nineveh Church (AINC), African Divine Church (ADC), and, Coptic Orthodox. These seven were purposively chosen because they consist of both mainline and African Independent movements, which gave us a strong holding in which we could discuss aspects of culture from both Missionary established and African Initiated Churches (AICs). Data collection relied on questionnaire guides for their flexibility to acquire the needed information. These were varied to allow an in depth inquiry as dictated by the context of the data needed. Sampled adherents in the said churches and all church leaders were interviewed using these interview guides and focus group discussions were also employed for open discussions on issues cutting across the both leadership, the adherents and community members on cultural practices and development. Data was analyzed through open and axial coding to provide themes for discussions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Culture: A contextual implication to church’s development activities

Many scholars are in agreement that in these pluralistic, post-modern times, it makes less sense than ever to think of culture as monolithic, Culture with capital [C] as if culture were a single entity to be accepted or rejected as a block. Cultural practices permeate every aspect of human’s life, including their religiosity. Let us take a

case study of christianity.

### Christ (ianity) and culture

In religious circles it would not be illogical to reason out that different denominations and movements are cultures within the wider community cultures. This is because each and every religious denomination and movement have their own beliefs and practices, which can be regarded as 'religious culture'. The Church as a culture therefore, as Clapp (1996: 89) denotes, has its own language and grammar, in which words such as love and service are crucial and are used correctly only according to certain 'rules'. Clapp explains that Christianity is historically based, meaning that it is inherited. It concerns what happened with a particular people, namely ancient Israel, and through a particular man-Jesus Christ, and this has been passed on to the current generations. Through Jesus' work, the Church understands itself as a unique culture. The Church is in this way a community and a history that is unfolding within a wide community of integrated cultures. It cannot also be underestimated that the communities through which the Gospel of Christ was propagated contained and still consists of a wide range of African cultural practices. This in many instances leaves the inhabitants with three choices of accepting to denounce their culture in favour of the transmitted Christian culture, rejecting the new culture of missionary Christian and focus on their traditional culture, thus African religion, or integrate the 'foreign' cultures into their own cultures.

These three positions can clearly be reflected in the lives of the occupants of Vihiga district. The field work revealed that major traditional cultural life patterns still feature among the people. This emerged from some of the Church leaders (especially from the mainline churches) who argued that cultural activities in the district have been a hindrance to both spiritual and economic growth. Others (specifically from the African Initiated Churches) however supported cultural beliefs and practices in the church as a way of accommodating the "rejected faithfuls" from mainstream churches. These differing views have resulted into what scholars of religion and culture have referred to as 'cultural wars'. The arguments have led to proliferation of new religious movements (NRMs) as well as Charismatic movements and formation of more African Initiated Churches (AICs) which are meant to accommodate the different cultural views of the people.

From the noted cultural 'wars' culture becomes a field of contention and an issue of debate over faith. Culture wars as Clapp (1996) reports have consequently reminded us that culture as ethos, as the way of life that forms character, is immensely powerful and not at all removed from any realm of life including religion-an affirmation that culture encompasses the everyday and

the mysterious, the mundane and the elevated, the ridiculous and the sublime. Culture is pervasive. The formation of AICs and NRMs as well as charismatic movements which can affirmatively be said that they are splinter groups or renewals of missionary founded/established Christianity are a vivid evidence of the three positions of Christ[ianity] and culture as expounded by Niebuhr. This is because the three positions seem to support an existence of missionary Christianity/mainline churches, AICs, Charismatic, and other NRMs, all which display different positions of Christian faith with regard to people's cultures. In development circles, these three employ varied opinions which either have positive or negative impact. The three positions of "Christ Above Culture", "Christ Within Culture", and "Christ Against Culture" have already been defined and the mission here is to provide Church's practical application.

(a) **Christ above culture:** Human seasons as seen in the rites of passage are among the strongly held African cultures. These range from birth rites, throughout the initiation, marriage, to death rites. Others are the planting rites as observed by the occupants of Vihiga district. The Tiriki for instance, hold the male circumcision rites as a very crucial stage of a man's life. This great importance is exemplified in the traditional circumcision procedures, carried out by a traditional specialist. This has continued to date amidst cries from the health ministry that the practice endangers the boys' lives, especially on complications associated with excessive bleeding and HIV infection. This practice was strongly condemned by the missionaries who introduced Christianity in Western Kenya. For this reason, the Catholic Church and other mainstream churches have sidelined such practices (though secretly practiced) since Christ is above culture. It is from the outlawed cultural practices that there have been proliferation of African initiated churches such as African Divine Church (ADC), some of which do not condemn cultural practices. Niebuhr's view about this group of people who believe that Christ is above culture is that:

"Christ should be seen as a fulfillment of cultural aspirations and the restorer of the institutions of the society. However, in Him there is something that neither arises out of culture nor contributes directly to it. He is discontinuous as well as continuous with social life and its culture. Culture therefore is not possible unless it goes beyond human achievement. All humans search for values, yet Christ enters into life from above with gifts which human aspirations cannot attain unless he relates humanity to a supernatural society and a new value centre (1951: 42)".

To Niebuhr, though Christ is a Christ of a given culture, he is above human culture because his values are high

above humanity's values and perceptions. This stand of 'Christ Above Culture' as adopted by some churches is one of the reasons that has led to formation of splinter groups by those who feel that it is important to hold on to cultural practices. The Pentecostals and evangelicals on the other hand have a different argument from the Roman Catholic Church, thus;

(b) **Christ against culture:** The Pentecostals and evangelicals condemn activities such as beer taking, traditional burial rites, wife inheritance, and polygamy. Some of these practices are accommodated by the "Christ above culture" proponents. An example is beer/wine taking, which can be accommodated in the Catholic Church unlike in most evangelical and Pentecostal churches. These practices are argued to be less harmful so long as they are done within limits. Some of the adherents of the Catholic Church quoted verses that 'a little wine is good for your stomach' 'what goes into one's mouth is not bad but what comes out'.

A common traditional practice by the natives of Vihiga is wife inheritance, that is, if a woman is widowed, she is supposed to be taken in by the brother, or a relative of the dead husband. Men on the other hand are allowed to practice polygamy, so that in cases of the death of one wife, they have another, or even in cases of barrenness, they can have children with the other wives. These practices have met great criticisms from mainly the Pentecostal churches and Charismatic movements. The pastor of Praise Centre at Shamakhokho in Tiriki East division argued that the Gospel of Christ does not allow the noted practices. He emphasized that not only did the people have to rely on this word, but also use common sense in regard to the changing times since the two practices not only encourages HIV and other related sicknesses, but also haboured poverty. He gave an example of polygamy, which to many families meant many children, yet the land in Vihiga is very limited. HIV on the other hand has been associated with poor living conditions and low production, as well as deterioration of human skills in the development process. Those churches that condemn these practices argue that those that encourage them are ignorant of both the word of God, and the times that we are living in. Some of those victims that fall on these condemnations find solace in the third argument, hence:

(c) **Christ within culture:** The outcasts from the mainstream churches have therefore sought alternative denominations and movements that propagate the 'Christ Within Culture' argument. This was evidenced by Archbishop Sayia Chabuga of ADC who observed that the church does not interfere with people's cultural practices and consequently encourage the 'outcasts' from other denominations to join ADC. They however advice them to liberalize the harmful cultural practices like wife inheritance in the era of HIV and AIDS. Following these

three prepositions, the study gives illustrative case studies hereunder to solidify the arguments in which culture can both be an impeder or a promoter of Church's development activities.

### Illustrative case studies

A follow up of these three arguments with some of the church leaders revealed a wide range of sediments. Deacon Joseph Abanda of St. Siril Coptic Orthodox church observed:

"Each people have their own culture and therefore the gospel should be understood in the context of enlightening people in their culture, thus Christ is within culture. It is not easy to change traditions and customs that people have held on to for a long period of time. It is important to evangelize to them in a way that the gospel fits into their cultural milieu... The negative aspects that are completely inhuman and end up hurting other people should however be discarded because they loose the Biblical command of Love. An example of such are communities that burry the dead with material belongings such as foodstuff or have them placed on their graves "for the spirits to feed on them", like the Idakhos. To me, this is unreasonable practice in an environment where food shortage is an indicator of poverty. However, that positive practices of death or burial commemorations/celebrations (Makumbusho), a tradition practiced widely in Western Kenya, is a practice that bides people together as a clan or community and consequently this unity is important. The practice has held people together irrespective of their religious affiliations. This unity could be used positively in the development arena, especially in pulling human resources together (O.I, 12/1/07)".

Abanda's view on "makumbusho" was nevertheless met with criticisms from other sources. Some church leaders noted that this was as expensive tradition where the bereaved incur a lot of expenses. Such material expenditure takes place amidst suffering/food poor people. Biblically, love for one's neighbour is through material, spiritual and emotional support (Matthew 25: 42-46; James 1:27; Isaiah 58: 7-8). The gospel in this way should be used to enlighten people in their own culture to avoid practices that defy the demands of the Biblical concept of love.

Father McGrath (1994), the priest in-charge of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Mwitubi location, Luanda division on his part explained:

"The central motivating force of the gospel is the concept "incarnation". Christ took the form of humanity and fitted into the human physical, social, economic and cultural contexts of the people of the community he lived in. He

(Christ) was a Jew. He was brought up in the Jewish culture and underwent the Jewish rites of life yet he was destined to save humanity. Subsequently, culture determines us but religion is meant to enlighten us. Culture determined that Christ was a Jew but the religion he had changed him and he brought it to enlighten the human race. This is the reason why he tried to perfect Judaism by making better the laws of Moses for the sake of humanity. For instance, the law about revenge, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, Christ changed this law to depict the importance of forgiveness...thus, if anyone slaps you on one cheek, give him the other one. Accordingly, Christ is above human culture. He only went through cultural rites only to identify with humanity. Following this argument therefore, some of the cultural practices that most people of Vihiga encouraged were destructive to both their spiritual and economic growth. It is surprising that most church members were aware of this destructive nature of culture but they argued that culture is important and has to be maintained. For example, the people of Vihiga invite Catholic priests to preside over burial ceremonies through officiating masses but they exclude them from the pre and post burial rites such as "cementing the grave" and "makumbusho" which are accompanied by different cultural beliefs and practices. For me and and Father Marmolejo, being foreigners in the land, we understand why the natives would discriminate us in such activities and do the pre and post burial rituals without our awareness. This is a people's culture and it is very difficult for any institution, including the Church, to delineate people from their culture (O.I, 11/1/07)".

At St. Tekla Coptic Orthodox Church, Miyekhe, Luanda division, we received different views. Dr. Irene, an Egyptian missionary doctor at the Coptic Orthodox nursing home. She noted:

"Each people have their own culture, the gospel is supposed to totally change a person into Christ's footsteps. The churches should preach the gospel as directed by Christ and consequently out of the cultural contexts of humanity since the gospel is against culture. This however does not mean that people can live in utopia. They were born in varied cultural contexts. By giving an example of marriage, polygamous marriage, to me, and this church, is bad culture as opposed to monogamous marriage which Christ advocates for. In addition, there are sins and problems associated with polygamous marriages such as scarcity of land, high population density, non-literacy, HIV and AIDS, among others. These are signs of underdevelopment due to cultural practices. The gospel should therefore liberate humanity from the cultural contexts they were born in and bring unity to them as God's people (13/3/07)".

From a group discussion with the two lay leaders and

five church members at St Tekla Coptic Orthodox church, we learned that the 'good cultural practices' among the Luhya community members have to be maintained. They gave an example of death anniversaries and commemorations (Makumbusho) and noted that this was a rich cultural heritage which unites people in the community to celebrate irrespective of their denominational backgrounds. They noted that this kind of culture does not interfere with people's faith, but instead brings them together as family and community members.

### **Implications of cultural practices to Church's development activities**

As development efforts continue to be propagated by the church and other development agencies, traditional beliefs and practices in the District such as wife inheritance, levirate marriages, sexual cleansing (the culture of *tero* and *chodo kode* where widows and dead bodies are cleansed through sexual intercourse), beliefs in HIV and AIDS cleansing through forceful sex (rape) with young virgin girls, beliefs that HIV and AIDS are not medical conditions but a curse (*cira*), among other practices, are considered a threat to development efforts in the District. The need to study these cultures and how the churches in the District respond to their effects can henceforth not be overlooked.

The question that emanates from the above arguments is whether culture promotes or retards spiritual and economic development. This has partly been answered by some arguments by several respondents. The cultural observations by the people of Vihiga according to some of the church leaders, to some extent retard development. An example that emerged was death anniversaries, initiation rites, beer taking and polygamy. These were noted to exploit the already poor populace, especially the death anniversaries, popularly known as "luvego" by the locals (*maragoli*). This is due to the ceremonial feasting that accompanies such anniversaries (Otindo, O.I, 4/1/07). Besides, the ceremonies involve dancing and beer taking by the youth, practices that have encouraged immorality, increasing chances of HIV and AIDS infections. Circumcision rites were also seen to contribute to the spread of HIV and AIDS and idleness in the district. This was more particularly associated with the *Abatirichi*, who emphasize on cultural circumcision rites, some of which encourage the youth to engage in sexual activities, besides being exposed to infection by the unsterilized knives used by the traditional 'specialists'.

Men are seen to be the key decision makers in homes and are free to marry women of their choice so long as it is culturally done. Polygamy is appreciated as man's wealth. Most respondents also held the view that the culture of the community has it that a woman is the home caretaker and should ensure sufficiency of food and other necessities in the home. The women are therefore sole providers in most homes. Agricultural activities, marketing,

and household chores are in the hands of women. Ironically, property control (land and money) is men's responsibility in these households. Evidently, the church development groups showed skewed membership to women's side and we can conclusively say that such cultures have led to low production in the District. These resulting factors have been linked to underdevelopment. Most churches especially the mainstream churches (Pentecostals and Catholic) have been teaching against them, thus Christ above and against culture debates are encouraged.

From another perspective, cultural diversity and practices were appreciated and affirmations given stating that no community exists without its own cultural milieu. The church should therefore accommodate people with diverse cultures and enlightened them without depriving them of their cultural beliefs and practices. An example is ADC, whose leaders observed that they do not interfere with people's cultural practices since culture is part and parcel of people's lives. They however conceded that the noted deficiencies from cultural practices are corrected through teachings in the church. For instance, they encourage artificial family planning so as to control the population growth, an issue that most mainstream missionary churches do not encourage, an example being the Roman Catholic Church. The ADC at the same time does not condemn traditional circumcision and polygamy. The Arch Bishop, Sayia Chabuga however explained that the church educates the adherents on healthy practices of these cultures. The education is meant to alleviate menaces like HIV and poverty that may result from some of the cultural practices.

Cultural diversity was subsequently applauded and blamed at the same time by varied respondents as one of the major causes of Christian diversity in the District. Those who applauded it noted that it has enhanced spiritual growth through establishment of numerous churches which result from the stinginess of the missionary founded churches that persecute and socially reject those who still uphold cultural heritage. Those who blamed cultural diversity as leading to Christian diversity noted that the numerous Christian denominations and movements were causing more confusion to the local populace and "diluting" the gospel of Jesus Christ. To the opponents of Christian diversity, economic development in the community was also jeopardized while to the proponent, both spiritual and material concerns were taken care of from a more contact point than before (the era of missionary founded churches). To them, Christian diversity has accommodated people's culture and they feel more at home in the churches that do not condemn them. In these churches, they can carry out development activities without fears and limitations.

### **Role of Christian groups in cultural wars**

Christian groups have a great humanitarian role to play in

people's lives. This is indicated by the activities and projects that some have initiated in the community to help, especially the poor. There were numerous development projects in the area of study that have been pioneered by different churches. The notable thing is that these projects only benefit the adherents of that particular denomination/movement. There is lack of ecumenical cooperation in matters of community development. This is however expected in a religiously diverse region, since doctrinal issues are likely to cause this disunity among the churches.

The numerous denominations on the other hand have ensured that people's culture is maintained. Those rejected from one denomination due to their cultural practices are free to join other denominations or start their own where they can freely practice their culture. If this is evident to the church leaders, it is upon them to educate the adherents about cultures that have for a long time been known to be destructive, such as the culture of wife inheritance, 'traditional' circumcision rites, rape of young girls with the hope that it will cleanse one of HIV, among others. This calls for creativity in which the church leaders should wisely call for abandonment of these cultures or provide replacement of the same. Such teachings will not only aid in Gospel propagation but also in development issues. Christians are known to use the Bible as the tool of standard judgment and subsequently this could be a base for cultural arguments and in the long run provide a solution to the culture 'wars'.

### **A biblical stand of church's cultural perspectives**

Many Christians despise "cultural wars" because some of the arguments espouse disturbing positions. The arguments can however be welcomed on the count that they help return Christians to a place where Christianity is conceived as away of life, as a manner of being and doing. According to Clapp (1996: 75), culture and Church arguments should be liberalized to make Christians move more easily and directly into the public, the social, the political and the economic realms easily. Culture arguments need to make it possible for the Church to become a cultivating process that produces people in a particular way (Acts, 17: 6).

It is important to note that the Church itself is a culture—a community with its own doctrines, beliefs and practices; guided by its own rules and regulations. The world we live in as observed earlier on consists of cultures and not culture with capital [C]. Women, men, Muslims, Jews, Christians, Americans, Anglos, Latinos, ethnic groups, movements, sects, cults—all these categories of groups intrude on us nearly every day of our lives (Clapp, 1996: 175). Consequently, the Church as the body of Christ needs to accommodate people from these diverse groups and cultures. Its teachings should be liberalized to ensure an enriched form of culture where teachings are offered

to strengthen and maintain positive cultures while neutralizing or discarding negative cultures. This argument is from the picture painted of Jesus Christ—a man who was a Jew and did not fight to discredit the Jewish culture but identified with it, only changing Judaism laws that depicted negative attitudes towards humanity, thus God. Subsequently, he strengthened the concept of Love-for God and for neighbour. The Cultural arguments if well conceptualized can return the Church to an existence that can become distinctively, exhilaratingly Christian—a social, economic and political existence quite like that of the Church in its earliest days (of sharing through the love of Christ).

### Conclusion

The paper has examined the culture in relation to Christianity and development. From the field data the paper concludes that culture is part and parcel of people's lives and it is therefore difficult to delineate them from their cultural practices. This is evident from the numerous churches in Vihiga district, some of which have been founded as counter-forces to the mainstream churches that have made an effort of barring some of their adherents from their cultural practices. This evidently calls for the church leaders from the mainstream churches, NRMs and AICs to streamline cultural observances in a way that does not strongly affect people's perspectives. This can be done through capacity building so as to either discard or neutralize negative cultures that are believed to affect people's

religiosity and development activities. The paper observes that the Bible as a Christian's guiding book should be used wisely as a tool to propagate positive cultural arguments.

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