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Puo Pha!: African theology is a public theology of dialogue

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In this article it is aimed to demonstrate that African theology is a public theology and a theology of dialogue based on its vocalism and oralism. The starting point is the definition of African theology, including its theologising methodologies. The method of research is a critical analysis of literature studies across the disciplines. A Sesotho proverbial or idiomatic *puo pha!* (orality) is used to illustrate that the decolonisation of theology is possible through African proverbs. This approach enhances African theology in its endeavours to unshackle itself from the western theology. As *puo pha!* African theology is the voice that addresses social menaces without compromises. It is the voice speaking not from the top, but from below. It is the voice of the masses, more than that of the intellectual elites. As *puo pha!* it engages African realities and experiences to make theological conclusions. It is argued here that African theology operates in public spaces since it is person-centred, expresses itself through processes of inculturation and is prophetic in character. Results show that African theology is a theology of encounter, and it is interactive. It becomes dialogical in nature, as it invites cultural contexts and eco-sciences in through dialogue in order that it may become relevant to African realities. The conclusion is the recommendation that African theologians embrace and promote an integrated theological method that synergises *puo pha!* with written theology for African theology, to have both biblical fidelity and cultural relevance.

Contribution: The article intends to impress the validity of African proverbs in explaining theology, practised within African context. It demonstrates the sensibilities of African theology as a public theology and a theology of dialogue.

Keywords: *Puo pha!*; African theology; public; dialogue; prophetic; culture; theologising.

Introduction

This article aims to apply the Sesotho (including Setswana and Sepedi) *puo pha!* as a proverbial expression to demonstrate that African theology is a public theology that is dialogical in nature. It is a theology that speaks in public to correct the public menaces such as corruption, racial prejudices, oppression of the poor, and all forms of injustice imaginable. African theology is going to be surveyed as a vocal theology on the public platform. After the survey, its public and dialogical nature will be examined, and conclusion(s) will be drawn to recommend to African theologians to embrace and promote *puo pha!* as an integrated theological method that synergises with written theology, to afford African theological fidelity and cultural relevance.

Public theology: Definition

Generally, public theology is defined as theology's voice in the public space. As a theological concept it emanates out of civil religion that engages ethical ways of life, hence civil religion, Christian ethics and public theology are intertwined and, in some literature, used interchangeably. It has become the branch of theology that speaks to all possible sciences. Since its entry into the vocabulary of theology, scholars are of unwavering conviction that 'ethics, and church history use of the term has extended into discussions of areas such as politics, law, human rights, economics, science, the environment, rhetoric, and sociology' (Blumoff 2000; Buckley 1994; Goldzwig 1987). It is a theology that is concerned with the vertical relationship between political or civil authority, and society, and horizontally with God, the gods, or that which is perceived by a people to be sacred and holy. Resane (2019) explains:

> Public theology is always public, speaking in public places and addressing the public issues for the sake or benefit of the public interest. (p. 1)

Therefore, when theology cracks itself out of the shell and exerts itself in public affairs, public theology is playing a prophetic role to bring justice out of chaotic incivility. South African

theologians at the forefront of public theology scholarship, include the likes of Ernst Conradie, Bernard Lategan, Nico Koopman and Dirkie Smit. Their main objective was to conceptualise and describe the role of the church and theology in the post-apartheid context (Kusmierz 2016:4).

African theology: Definitions and expressions through proverbs

African theology is Christian theology through African cultural realities. It is the interpretation of Christianity from the African perspective. It emerged as a discipline within theological constructs in the middle of the twentieth century. It surfaced as critical analysis of colonial or missionary Christianity that marginalised African cultures from biblical hermeneutics. In a nutshell, African theology is engaged to shape Christianity in an African way, by adapting and using African concepts and ideas (Nwibo 2010). African theology engages people and their cultures by entering the commonality of human spiritual depth and wisdom, to find dignity for Africans.

African philosophy, wisdom and ethics are all encased in African idioms and proverbs. One of the powerful ways of decolonising theology, is to express it through African proverbs, or engaging African realities and experiences embedded in these proverbs. In order to understand the mindset of people, one needs to examine and assess their proverbs. These proverbs reveal people's thoughts, beliefs, and moralities. Musoke (2018:56) enlightens that 'Proverbs are traditional wise sayings whose authors are not known; they give advice on how to live'. These proverbs are intended to transmit morals, ethics and philosophy of life. Their construction is easy and made memorable to be retained cognitively. Their formulations are intentionally brief and sometimes even poetic and interesting (Katongole 1997:27). Musoke (2018:56) continues to point out that proverbs contain the synthesis of past experiences and wisdom to shape both the present and the future of the individual. Christian theology in Africa maintains its historicity and tradition, although expressed in African idioms and cultural patterns (Dickson 1984:120). It is for this reason that it is sometimes called theology at the grassroots. Its vision, as verbalised by Kalilombe (1985), is to enable members of the communities:

> [T]o engage actively in reflecting on their faith in the context of their everyday life and taking the responsibility in making their faith bear fruit on their challenges of their personal life and their mission in society. (p. 1)

Indeed, 'The African experience can awaken theological and pastoral themes that are dormant or latent in world Christianity' (Healey & Sybertz 2012:15). African proverbs and idioms engage theology at a deeper level to gain understanding of and through the daily realities of Africans. When this approach is adopted, that is, theologising to gain theological understanding through proverbs and idioms, God's great deeds in Africa will be told in and through African voices (Ilo 2017:152). The Christ-story should be told

and heard in and through African voices in order to bring out the actuality of biblical faith in this continent. The real actualisation of faith comes through proverbial expressions and biblical hermeneutical engagement. Following or applying this, will make African Christianity to remain faithful to her unique history and experience, as a way of balancing the forces of western modernist narratives of progress and development (Ilo 2017:165–166). There is no doubt that Christianity's 'rootedness in history is the hallmark of orthodox Christianity and reminds us that we should not lose ourselves in a maze of myths and legends' (Michael 2020:22). This does not mean that applying African wisdom and philosophy will lead us from the historicity of Christianity, but rather that it will deepen our understanding of Christian faith through *culturality.*

African theology fits in well with the definition of theology as a 'systematic discourse concerning God and his ways' (Ariarajah 1977:3). According to Nyamiti (2017), African theology:

> '[D]esignates discourse on God (and on all that is related to him) in an African way … in accordance with the African mentality and needs or aspirations'. (p. 290)

It is 'how God-talk interweaves with contextual historical reality … without reducing God to the human image' (Uzukwu 2017:105). Like any theology for that matter, it arises from a religious experience out of a context. As Makumba (2017:29) points that African theologians conclude that, 'There was no contradiction as such between the transcendence of God and his "involvement" in the world'. African theology is the response of a struggle to understand the gospel message in a certain context. It challenges the western methodical theologising by prioritising and reframing the praxis story and proverbial expressions to do critical reevaluation of western Christian thought that tend to marginalise African experiences. For Africans, religion is 'an experienced reality' (Mugambi 1974:54), therefore, should be culturally appealing and relevant.

African theology as theology remains and continues to be a theology of hope. Amid continental crises, it seeks to readily respond to give answers for the hope that Africans are looking for (Katongole 2017:199). As a theological discipline, African theology is open to interpretation and explanation. According to Barth (1962:171), theology is indeed *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking for understanding), subsequently has become deabsolutised, dynamic and dialogic, therefore relational. This theology treats God 'as far as he is involved in the day-to-day living of individuals and whole communities' (Makumba 2017:28). It is not separated from the *Sitz im Leben* of the people, as it cannot be 'separated from daily concerns for food, shelter, health, wealth, children, happiness and good social life' (Waruta 1994:79).

African theology is *Puo pha!*

Puo pha! is a Sesotho exclamatory idiom expressing the notion of speaking directly, telling it like it is, stating the truth, or

straight talk. It speaks of exposing or revealing the concealed facts, expressing them verbally in public. It is a verbal unearthing of information concealed from the public. When someone comes out and says, '*Ke bua puo pha!*', he or she means, 'I speak the hidden truth without any fear of intimidation'. In some instances, the speaker will say, '*Ga ke ngwana wa ga mmamolobeng*' ('I am not the secret keeper'), '*Ke bya puo pha!*' ('I verbalise the hidden information publicly'). One opposition party in Botswana, Botswana National Front, took it as their rallying call: *Puo pha!* to expose the secret corruption dealings within the ruling party.

Puo pha! cannot happen in a vacuum. It is like a Swahili *baraza* – a balcony or a pavilion where the community council meeting is held. In this context, it is 'an African experience of conversation in public meetings to discuss important matters' (Opongo & Béré 2021:5). *Puo pha!* is the voice of *moseka phofu ya gaabo yo o sa tshabeng go swa lentswe*: a special appeal to theology to speak vigorously, vivaciously, and vividly (Resane 2018b:11). African theology is the voice that addresses social menaces without any compromise. It is the voice speaking not from the top, but from below. It is a voice of the masses more than that of the intellectual elites. It constructs 'theology from below, from the underside of history, from the experience of the local people' (Healey & Sybertz 2012:31).

Puo pha! is all about the vocal and narrative nature of theology. It refers to 'the varied religious expressions of an oral community based on their underlying religious expressions' (Naude 1996:22). *Puo pha!* is indeed an oral theology, which is unlike written theology hidden from the masses in print works, Kumuti (2020) verbalises:

> [A]s produced by the nature of the Christians in African in forms of songs, sermons, teachings, prayers, conversations etc., it is a theology in the open-air, transmitted orally to either a large or a small congregation. It is mostly unrecorded and therefore may not find itself in libraries and seminaries. (p. 2)

African theology is thus a contextual theology. It interprets reality orally and values oral theology as a theologising process, because as Kimutai (2020:3) continues, if it remains trapped and wrapped inside the papers:

> [A] completely written theology will not totally impact the African and will be impotent in penetrating the African world view. … it is personal, memorized and in oral communication. (p. 3)

This orality leads theology towards a focus on an individual who can access God-knowledge without being bombarded by paperworks.

Puo pha! – oral theology needs to be incorporated into the African theology in order to make biblical theology accessible to the African community of believers. When theology is transmitted through *puo pha!* it becomes a bridge between the written intellectual theology found in academia, and public theology that is found in public squares. *Puo pha!* takes theology to the illiterate masses and closes the gaps between the educated and the uneducated, the literate and the illiterate, and of course the reached and the unreached.

The opposite of *puo pha!* is *sephiri,* which is 'a secret or something hidden and not to be known'. When a person, known to speak *puo pha!* comes into the meeting, people become uncomfortable. They become restless because the person may know about skeletons in their closets and will haul them out in public. *Puo pha!* knows no privacy. All information is exposed and advertised. Dirty linen may be hung in public. African theology fits into this category well. It speaks publicly and cannot hide the reality. Once *puo pha!* is spoken and the *sephiri* is out, there is no more reason for concealment or privatisation. African theology as a public theological discipline is *puo pha!* – operating publicly and contributing towards universal theological deliberations. It reveals 'an experienced reality, indescribable but extremely real' (Mugambi 1974:50), informing the world about the African experience of oppression, sidelining and marginalisation by western theology.

The conservative western theologians have some reservations about African theology, especially those from the Protestant evangelical wing of faith. They are discomforted by its exposure of their hermeneutical appropriations that did not consider the African wealth of wisdom. Whenever they encounter African theologians' voices, they withdraw into their fundamentalistic evangelical cocoons and coil back into their orthodox trenches, while entangling themselves with their apologetic webs. The truth remains that African theology surfaces biblical texts through *puo pha!* (vocally and orally) and make these texts relevant for African understanding and appropriation of the Christian faith. When African theology ascends the stage of dialogue, *puo pha!* comes into the fore and listeners know that the *sephiri se dule* ('secret is now out'). With African theology expressed through African proverbs, idioms, sages, poetry, et cetera on the stage, Christianity becomes vital and real for an African audience.

What makes African theology a public theology

Since African theology engages the cultural context in which it is incarnated, it becomes a public theology. After all, religion in general 'cannot escape the necessity of being incarnated in a culture' (Dickson 1974:199). It becomes public as it clarifies biblical theology in and from the public space. As theology, it is not muted in the public affairs of African experiences.

As a theological discipline, African Theology is vocal in the public. Theology as God's presence was never a private discipline, but a *vocal voice as a public square practice*. Its vocality and assertiveness was never meant to be a secret exercise. The hidden God has always been audible and vocal to his people through a diversity of media. The author of the epistle of the Hebrews speak to this effect:

> In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has

spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (Heb 1:1–3)

Though this God cannot be seen with a naked eye, He could make his presence known through his voice. In his human incarnation as Jesus Christ, his acts, word, and presence were always in public. Jesus Christ never practised God's presence and love in secretive spaces, but out in the streets and town squares. Jesus and his disciples were the people's street evangelists of the time. Their ministry was in the open-air. His encounters were in the streets, homes, along the coasts, fields, community rendezvous such as the synagogues and the temple; to such an extent that some of his encounters could exclaim: 'Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us *on the road* and opened the Scriptures to us?' (Lk 24:32).

African theology is a public theology because of its *person-centredness*. African theology is person-centred. By person-centred it is meant that African theology verbalises itself through human beings about human trivialities. The Rwandese theologian, Kagame (1969:5–11) points out that although Eurocentric religion emphasises the utmost human goal being love for God, African religion rests on perpetuation of humankind. The two ideologies stand in juxtaposition, but what is outstanding is that the greatest lifegoal for Africans is living culturally and continues to live that way through descendants (Kagame 1969:231–236). Human experience is therefore an *eschatological* reality experienced now and in life to come. This makes African theology a discipline of preparing humans now for a better life to come. However, the *eschatological* life starts in the present, the public. This means African theology is a theology from below, starting hermeneutical processes from the context in which a human interpreter and the content stand. Through *puo pha!* in public spaces, of the here and life to come, African theology promotes public responsibility for vitality in life and the hereafter.

African theology expresses its publicity through inculturation processes. This is one of the powerful processes whereby African theology had been internationally marked for. Inculturation is the cultural engagement in which theologians glean the biblical meaning by interacting with the people on the ground. Awiti (2021) points to this fact:

> Inculturation as a process of the interaction between Christianity and the cultures, has to take into consideration the total collective religious, social, and moral life as it gradually takes a concrete form in each culture. (p. 247)

One of the processes of inculturation is the presentation of biblical message through a *mother tongue.* One of the noted African theologians, Béré (2021:161), points out: 'The African Theology of inculturation has been constructed as a discourse of translation of the "deposit of faith" into the African

language'. People and their languages are in public spaces and are engaged publicly to enhance theological thought processes. Kwesi Dickson, a Ghanaian theologian is noted for his Christological theology and his emphasis on the necessity of the Bible in the mother tongue. This emphasis of the mother tongue by some African theologians, makes African theology a public theology as it engages the people on the ground for hermeneutical insights in Bible translation. In agreement with Sundkler (1960:238), he insists that 'doing theology is not complete without a cogent grasp of the mother tongue which is peculiarly the language of the inner life and prayer'. For African theologians, mother tongue and language in theological education are crucial to theological education in Africa, as they offer a people their identity (Edusa-Eyison 2006:110).

Through inculturation processes, it becomes a participatory theology by connecting African cultures and Christian faith. The relevancy of the church in Africa can be expedited on the 'premises that the gospel or the church must understand and relate to Africans within their cultural and religious context' (Gwamma 2014:9). Any theological endeavours without cultural consultations lead to false theological conclusions. Texts may be misinterpreted or made nonsensical for the readers. A lack of cultural engagement in hermeneutical processes may lead to some heretical conclusions. There is an inevitable metaphysical belief that, 'African reality is constructed by the reality of the community' (Matolino 2014:71). There is a general agreement with Orobator (2008:130–131) that inculturation is a dynamic and integral process and is always a generative term as it continues to unfold through time.

African theology as a public theology is also *prophetic*. It is a theology that speaks into the cosmos and proposes rediscovery from banality to authenticity. Theology is prophetic when it critically engages the community and foresees the renewal on the horizon. It prophetically engages socio-political and ecclesial structures, because these structures historically proved to be 'unsuitable for harvesting the riches of Africa's spiritual and social heritage on how to build communities, and harnessing the vast natural, human, spiritual and cultural resources of Africa' (Ilo 2021:196). One can further say that prophetic theology endeavours to interlace the Christian dogma with the world's pain and proposes the healing thereof. It calls for believers to fearlessly encounter the real world and deal publicly and forcefully with political systems that abuse human rights and mask corruption and foster violence. This calls for intellectual engagement to challenge social menaces such as sexual abuse, xenophobia, corruption in all its fashions, prejudices based on race, tribe, ethnicity, disability or any social or economic privileges. It carries out these endeavours through eloquent ecclesiology that calls for accountability for the *kerygmatic* principles of Christian *agape* with its agonising demands. It is a theology that invites the public at risk to incarnate God in the cosmic affairs. Therefore, prophetic theology 'sees things from below' (Bonhoeffer 2010:52) and

takes sides with the marginalised sections of the societies, especially the poor. It does not condemn but proposes a *kairos* moment that 'demands some prophetic response' (De Gruchy 2016:3), which may be a call to repentance, restitution, or reconciliation. In the context of the famous South African *Kairos Document*, explained by Suderman (2017):

> This theology challenged the Church and everyone who professed to be Christian, calling them to become involved in the struggle for liberation from the violence and oppression of apartheid … Prophetic Theology challenged the Church in South Africa to be active, albeit in a thoughtful way, in the struggle against apartheid. (p. 97)

Prophetic theology challenges the status quo and speaks *puo pha!* on behalf of the victims of natural and social injustice, which is the *raison d'être* for the emergence of African theology. It is known for a timely response, the *kairos*, which responds to the *status quo* and proposes some alternative positive schemes that possess an innate capacity to reverse negative conditions addressed. In the South African context, the *Kairos Document* required prophetic ecclesiology, 'a theology and a church that did not sit on the fence but that clearly and unambiguously took a stand against apartheid's unjust and oppressive system' (1986:7–8). This calls for condemnation of any African theology that operates within some blurry lines or grey areas. Wasike (2001) explains that prophetic ecclesiology must lead to the churches that can come up with theologies:

> [T]hat will seriously criticize the African experience that has led to the present condition in order to come up with clear, prophetic and visionary statements that will give guidance to the African people for the future. (p. 47)

The prophetic role of the church is to guide the church into the future, therefore theological issues must be articulated *(puo pha!)* in ways that engage cultural elements such as proverbs, idioms, and poetry. Prophetic theology is not just a public theology but a *puo pha!* through dialogue, in order to arrive at the synergy and symbiosis between theology and culture. This prophetic role in Africa has met suspicions or resistance from and by the politics of the continent. When the prophetic voice of the church rises in the political corridors, denouncing corruption and unjust practices by politicians, it is dubbed meddling, interfering in or poisoning politics (Nyenyembe 2021:37). However, the prophetic *puo pha!* cannot be muted by political regimes.

What makes African theology a theology of dialogue

African theology concerns itself with dialogue between the Bible and African life and thought. It is a theology of dialogue because it is introspective and reflective, endeavouring to assess the current ongoing relationship with the western Christianity. It looks at the relationship of Christianity presented to Africans by missionaries and the African culture in which this Christianity operates or expresses itself. Its dialogical nature is validated by its actions of consultations, seeking understanding, reinterpretation or

remedial actions with the intended goal of correcting divisions and misunderstandings between Christianity and African cultures. This is highlighted by Ilo (2021:186–187) that African Theology 'starts from a culture of encounter which is an openness to every human and cosmic reality in their beauty and complexity'. Its theologising processes involve intentions of bringing divergent views closer to each other. It is expressed by Resane (2018a) that dialogical theology:

> [T]akes the form of theological consultations, which highlight differences and seek ways of coming closer together through new understandings, reinterpretation or correction of misunderstandings, and healing of divisions. (p. 4)

Operating in the public square and being dialogical (engaging socially) makes it a political theology. This is confirmed by Tracy (1984:238) that all theology is a form of social engagement, a form of political theology. African theology as a theology of dialogue delves into critical assessments of all socio-political menaces including 'the political culture of impunity, violence, and of greed that is built on the exploitation and on the backs of the poor' (Katongole in Moerschbacher 2017:203).

African theology is a public theology of dialogue. It is critical of cultural practices that do not synchronise with the biblical teachings. It therefore 'promotes dialogue not only with traditional African cultural values but with social change' (Rwiza 2021:368). It demands 'the end of monologues' (Mbembe 2000:3). Its dialogical nature is its communal orientation. It is interactive in nature and conversational in methodology. Its aim is enrichment of dialogical partners (theologians and communities). It is clearly voiced by Healey and Sybertz (2012):

> In the active dialogue between faith and culture there is a mutual or two-way challenge and enrichment. The African culture challenges the Christian faith to be truly universal. This means being faithful to the Gospel as 'good news' to all people and all cultures. This also means breaking away from the present Western wrapping of Christianity to become a genuinely inculturated world Church. p. 27)

As an interactive theology, African theology is not only about humanity, but it also speaks to ecological or environmental crises, because decolonisation critics painted a negative picture of the image of Africa citing one negative picture of ecological neglect (Birmingham 1995:89). This theology operates within earth-related religions, therefore must speak to that effect. African people are concerned about interacting with religious forces in order to obtain good life here and now. These forces revolve around health and prosperity, success and happiness and productive marriages (Greene 1996:123). African Theology therefore engages eco-sciences to correct this misnomer. Therefore, as Resane (2021) asserts:

> The task of the church should be beyond the liberation of the oppressed … there should also be the liberation of Mother Earth from scandalous usurpation of responsibility because of greed and self-enrichment at the expense of Mother Nature. (p. 42)

African theology continues to invite all possible stakeholders to the table of dialogue in order to address negative African experiences such as wars, environmental degradation, pandemic outbreaks (HIV/AIDS, COVID-19, etc.). African theologians from all theological persuasions meet regularly to dialogue on the pressing issues of the continent. Dialogue in Africa is part of botho/ubuntu in which people sit around a circle to deliberate and try to come up with solutions.

Conclusion

African proverbs and idioms are full of wisdom that can be used to express the deeper meaning embedded in theological constructs. Proverbs are a rich source of African philosophy, spirituality and theological insights. African theology as theology from below is vocal and oral in nature, and a theological voice can be detected and discerned through these proverbs. The proverbial expression *puo pha!* sensitises theologians to the fact that theology is not a secretive form of metaphysics hidden somewhere, maybe in books, journals or technological media, but is in a public arena where it can assert itself verbally. *Puo pha!* carries the connotation of no secrets or hidden agenda, but truth that is told in public. African theology engages or exerts itself as a public theology and a theology of dialogue. As an engaging theology, it concerns itself with unshackling theology from the western biases caused by the marginalisation of African philosophy and wisdom in their hermeneutical appropriation of the biblical texts.

African theology is a public theology, because as a *puo pha!* it is person-centred, rediscovers itself through inculturation processes and its prophetic role. It is a theology of dialogue. As such a theology, it validates its actions through consultations, seeking understanding, reinterpretation, or remedial actions with the intended goal of correcting divisions and misunderstandings between Christianity and African cultures.

African theology as a public theology, engages politics and all sciences, inviting them to the table of dialogue in order to gain some insights that determine its theologising themes and processes. As a theology of dialogue, African theology is a continuous venture of decolonisation of theology, since its theologising processes are basically 'divesting African philosophical thinking of all undue influences emanating from our colonial past' (P'Bitek 2011:xi). All these convergencies of African theology leave us with the conceivable point that Bediako (2004:8) calls 'grassroots theology'. Some African theologians like Hastings (1976:54) call it oral theology, spontaneous or implicit theology. It is interactive and a theology of encounter.

It is therefore recommended that African theologians embrace and promote an integrated theological method, that synergises *puo pha!* with written theology. This needs to be done in order for African theology to have both biblical fidelity and cultural relevance.

African theology is *puo pha!*: Speaking directly, tell it like it is, state the truth, talk straight!

Acknowledgements

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