

Stifling Human Responsibility? Human Agency and Transcendence in African Spirituality and Cultural Idioms

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Abstract

This article is an African traditional religious and cultural analysis of human responsibility as expressed in proverbs and idioms that demand human agency and transcendence in chiShona, Zimbabwean isiNdebele, and isiZulu languages. The analysis is done in line with the common spiritual belief that material wealth is a product of spiritual or magical power. The article analyzes selected proverbs and idioms from the three languages that demand or express agency and transcendence. This demand for agency and transcendence is juxtaposed with a religious belief of wealth as a product of spiritual and magical powers. Spiritualizing material wealth promotes a blame syndrome that is detrimental to human responsibility. A framework of human agency and transcendence that promotes human responsibility in African contexts of poverty is proposed. The article aims to contribute with an African response to poverty that promotes human responsibility and avoids a defeatist and escapist reliance on magic and spiritual solutions.

Keywords: African, agency, economy, magic, responsibility, poverty, spirituality, transcendence

Introduction

This article follows my previous research on human agency (human power to act) and transcendence (human power to overcome) in African neo-Pentecostalism (Banda 2022a; 2022b; 2023). In this article I focus on selected proverbs and idioms that demand agency and transcendence in the chiShona,

Zimbabwean isiNdebele, and isiZulu languages in southern Africa. The analysis of Muhwati (2010) on the chiShona and isiNdebele cultural dialogues of agency and transcendence forms the background to this study. My analysis includes isiZulu because of its close affinity and strong influence on Zimbabwean isiNdebele. Zimbabwean isiNdebele is closer to isiZulu and different from the South African isiNdebele although they all share vast similarities with the isiNguni family of languages that also include isiXhosa and isiSwati. Zimbabwean isiNdebele is my mother tongue, and I have direct influences from chiShona and isiZulu.

There are many proverbs and idioms in the three languages that call people to take personal responsibility by *ukuvuka uzenzele* (*wake up and do something for yourself* [isiNdebele]). There are, however, also strong beliefs in these cultures that wealth is acquired spiritually and magically, which seemingly suggests that without spiritual or magical power one is unable to use their agency and transcendence to attain material wealth. Thus, the prominent functions of traditional spiritual practitioners like the *inyanga* is to provide people with medicines to bring them wealth, to protect their wealth, and to enhance fertility of crops and animals and productivity in one's economic endeavors, among many other things (Humbe 2018:18; Wood 2008:338). Equally, the role of witchcraft is to destroy people's wealth, and to cause infertility and unproductivity, while stunting people's progress in their economic endeavors. Therefore, despite the emphatical call to *vuka uzenzele*, wealth and poverty, success and failure all have spiritual causes to many southern Africans that seem to defy the exercise of individual agency and transcendence.

This article starts by describing human responsibility as expressed in the agency and transcendence of people and the nature of spiritual economy in African Traditional Religions (ATRs). It then examines proverbs and idioms in chiShona, isiNdebele, and isiZulu that demand human agency and transcendence. In the following section, I critique how the magical and spiritual perception of material reality stifle aspects of human responsibility by promoting a reliance on magical and spiritual powers in ways that negate agency and transcendence. I close the article by challenging Africans to move from a response to poverty that relies on magic and spiritual powers to a response that fosters human responsibility. In this article, I attempt to contribute with an African response to poverty that promotes human

responsibility and avoids a defeatist and escapist reliance on magic and spiritual solutions.

Human Responsibility and the Spiritual Economy in Africa

Muhwati (2010:152) presents agency and transcendence as ‘expressions that underscore the need for positive participation and contribution in life in order to overcome life threatening forces and attain victory’. Participating in and contributing positively to life entails agency and transcendence because it depicts how people rise to overcome life-destructive powers that hinder their attainment of human flourishing. According to Huber (2020:191), responsibility entails being accountable for one’s deeds and their consequences. Huber (2020:191-192) argues that accountability entails a person’s autonomy and self-determination which means that the human capacity acts in an answerable manner. Accountability is essential in motivating people to rise and take control of their destiny (Neequaye 2013:213). Agency and transcendence are critical attributes of human responsibility because responsibility entails taking appropriate action with the aim of overcoming one’s undesirable situation (Neequaye 2013:213).

Although transcendence can also mean that which is not affected by or lying beyond agency, in this article I limit transcendence to human power to overcome undesirable situations, the power to extricate one’s self from life-inhibiting contexts. Furthermore, agency (ownership of one’s participation) and transcendence (overcoming one’s hindrances) are different but mutually inclusive and work together to prompt people to take responsibility for their adverse situations and undertake the necessary steps of finding appropriate solutions. As qualities of human responsibility, agency, on the one hand, is the ownership of action which is the in-sourcing of personal responsibility instead of out-sourcing it to other people, while transcendence, on the other, carries the idea of efforts of dislodging one’s hindrances to meaningful life instead of surrendering in hopeless resignation. Agency and transcendence are therefore important elements of human responsibility and are expressed in Muhwati’s use of agency and transcendence to call Africans to arise and tackle their contexts of pain by ‘abandon[ing] life-stultifying philosophies of victimhood, hopelessness, helplessness, lifelessness, and life-weary pessimism (Muhwati 2010:152). Agency and transcendence are attributes of human responsibility

because they contest poor people to approach life as a challenge to be confidently confronted and not something to resign from (Muhwati 2010:154).

However, the African economic sphere is basically spiritual which means material wealth and everything needed in life are understood as originating from the spiritual world. According to the ATRs, wealth and wellbeing come from the spiritual world, which leads to religiosity that permeates all aspects in Africa in order to remain connected to the power that gives life (Mbiti 1969:1; Magesa 1997:54; Okorocho 1994:72-73). This means that people's connection to the spiritual realm is fundamental to economic wellbeing.

The spiritualistic perception of material reality results in a spiritual economy that thrives on securing what Placide Tempels controversially describes as the 'vital force', which is the connection with the spiritual world that sustains life. Tempels (1959:30) contends:

The Bantu say, in respect of a number of strange practices in which we see neither rime nor reason, that their purpose is to acquire life, strength or vital force, to live strongly, that they are to make life stronger, or to assure that force shall remain perpetually in one's posterity.

With this statement, Tempels expresses African religiosity that is primarily focused on maintaining one's hold on the force or power that gives life and economic wellbeing. In this perspective, poverty signals a person's disconnection from the source of life while material wealth signals one's connection with the spiritual source of life. Therefore, African religious life is generally marked with the quest for dynamism in the form of spiritual power to attract wealth and human wellbeing and to repel evil powers that aim to destroy people's wealth and human wellbeing (Anderson 2000:175; Turaki 2019:52). While there is a reliance on good magic that brings good fortune and protects people's economic power and wealth from destructive spirits, some people use evil magic described by Comaroff and Comaroff (1999:282) as 'occult economy' which entails the employment of 'monstrous means and freakish familiars to appropriate the life force' of other people 'in order to strengthen themselves or to satisfy consuming passions'.

As there are different ways to interpret the notion of the occult economy, my focus in this article is limited to the basic reliance on magic and

spiritual power to attain economic wealth. It belongs to another study to focus on the peculiar dynamics of the occult economy. In the next section, I will explore how traditional African culture demands human responsibility by demanding that people utilize their human agency and transcendence to transform their undesirable circumstances into contexts that enhance life.

The Ancient Cultural Demand for Human Responsibility

Human responsibility as expressed by agency and transcendence is foundational in the religiously based African cultures. We have already noted the assertion of scholars of ATRs that religion permeates every aspect of African culture. However, some African scholars such as Kwame Gyekye (2011) question this assertion by querying the idea that African moral values and principles derive from religion which implies that African morality is a religious morality. Nonetheless, religion plays a foundational role in much of African imagination of wealth and human wellbeing.

One finds strong expectations in African traditional cultures on every member of the society to work towards the wellbeing of everyone in the whole society. Therefore, to not contribute towards this goal ‘is regarded as inimical to the continued existence of the community’ (Neequaye 2013:276). Despite many tendencies to fall victim to a dependency syndrome in African communities, African cultures emphatically demand human responsibility by requiring people to innovatively rise and act (agency) and overcome (transcendence) hindrances to their personal and communal welfare. Neequaye (2013:276) refers to Gyekye (1996:35) who argues that human responsibility is demonstrated by how in all African communities ‘children are trained right from the beginning through proverbs, folklore, maxims, etc., to inculcate the habit of recognizing the needs of others, and to work for the welfare and wellbeing of every member of the community’. In African communities individual and corporate responsibilities are emphasized by how the harmful consequences of one person’s negative actions can extend to the entire community (Neequaye 2013:276).

There are therefore various sayings, proverbs, folklore, dirges, and maxims that challenge and charge individuals to not give up to failure, to not parasitically depend on other people, but to rise and act to fend for themselves and overcome the state of their lack. Therefore, this section will look at various proverbial sayings in three southern African languages – isiZulu, Zimbabwean

isiNdebele, and chiShona, that demand agency and transcendence from people. Muhwati (2010:152) states that there are many African proverbs that emphatically demand humans to embrace agency and transcendence, and repudiate victimhood and pessimism that destroy life and hope. Furthermore, '[r]ather than misnaming human life as an arena for the eloquent expression and dramatization of victimhood, the proverbs name life as a site for agency and transcendence' (Muhwati 2010:153). The proverbial sayings express 'a philosophy of action' (Muhwati 2010:152) that should be adhered to by all responsible members of the community.

We begin by quoting sayings, proverbs, and idioms that repudiate a dependence syndrome, hopelessness, resignation, and fatalism. AmaNdebele demand agency and accountability from people by saying *vuka uzenzele*, which could be translated as 'wake up and do things on your own'. Sometimes, just the last verb *zenzele* – 'do it on your own' – or its plural form, *zenzeleni*, is used. The message of this saying is that one should not just sleep or sit around, or depend on other people to do things for them. They should rather wake up and actively do things for themselves to overcome their problems. As an idiom of agency and transcendence, *vuk'uzenzele* instructs, encourages, and provokes people to take responsibility and act, shunning dependence and fatal resignation. Because the idiom *vuka uzenzele* challenges people to unlearn victimhood and dependence by unleashing their creative energy, the variations of the saying have been used as names for people, education facilities, business ventures, and cooperatives among Nguni-speaking people in South Africa and Zimbabwe. It does not only demand agency, but also an awareness that a good life is not attained by lazing around, but by taking practical steps to be a productive person.

Traditional African societies promote agency and transcendence by warning people of the disastrous consequences of laziness, a lack of initiative, and giving up, which lead to failure. For example, the isiZulu saying, *ayikho inkomo yobuthongo* states that no cow is acquired by sleeping. The saying charges people to wake up and go to work to earn their cow, meaning wealth. In the traditional Zulu culture, cows denote wealth, and one's wealth and social status are measured by the size of a herd of cattle, as affirmed by the saying *ubuhle bendoda zinkomo zayo* ('the beauty of a man is in his cattle').

Similarly, laziness is discouraged. Hence, it is stated in isiZulu, *isihlala ndawonye sidla amajwabu aso* ('the one who stays in one place eats their own skin') to warn people who choose to sit at home and do nothing

instead of going out to work that they will have nothing to eat and end up scraping their skin for food. Similarly, the proverb, *akunkwali ephandela enye* ('the partridge does not scratch the ground for other partridges but for itself'), discourages a dependency syndrome. These proverbs discourage laziness and dependence by invoking a notion of agency and transcendence.

It is common to hear amaNdebele promoting agency and transcendence by encouraging ingenuity through trial and error. The saying, *indoda ngezamayo* ('the real man is the one who tries'), suggests that a real man distinguishes himself by trying; therefore, instead of giving up, the man must try everything until a breakthrough is achieved. Sometimes, *umuntu* is used instead of *indoda*, indicating that a person must demonstrate their authentic human identity by trying all things until they attain success.

Transcendence is instilled by discouraging giving up after failure, according to the proverb, *akulahlwa mbeleko ngokufelwa* ('do not discard the baby carrier because the baby has died'), just as parents whose baby has died should not throw away the baby carrier and abandon the duty of procreation (Muhwati 2010:155). Similarly, when one fails, one should keep on trying, until they achieve their goal. Such proverbs discourage the negation of agency and transcendence because of a temporary sense of loss (Muhwati 2010:155).

Similarly, the vaShona encourage people who struggle to achieve their goals to have resilience, stating *sango rinopa waneta* ('the forest rewards the hunter when he is exhausted or when all hope of finding game is lost'). This saying encourages resilience and patience, and warns someone who goes out to hunt that they should not expect to catch game immediately, but to keep on hunting because the bush rewards those who are resilient till the end (Muhwati 2010:156). However, *sango rinopa waneta* can also imply that the ancestors, the supreme guardians of wildlife and the environment, only reward people who never give up but keep hunting until the end. African culture also expects people to find creative solutions for the complex difficulties of life. The vaShona refer to the proverbial old woman from Chivi (a semi-arid rural village in Zimbabwe), who allegedly boiled stones in an attempt to extract soup from them: *Zvinhu zviudzwa, chembere yekwaChivi yakabika mabwe yakanwa muto*. The proverb highlights that there should be no end to ingenuity or trial and error. This proverb indicates that African people do realize that life is complex and difficult and, thus, that people need to apply ingenuity to conquer it. AmaNdebele expresses the same thought by saying, *akwaziwa okwanonisa ingulube* ('it is not clear what made the pig fat, since it eats anything it finds

that can be eaten’). The idea is that a person does not know the exact ingredients of success, and therefore they must try everything if they want to succeed. Thus, just like the hungry old Chivi woman who attempted to extract soup from stones, and the pig that eats everything, people should try all things.

The vaShona also encourages trial and error: *Zvinoramba mazama* (‘things can only fail after you have actually tried’). These proverbial sayings are examples of cultural resources that are used by traditional African communities to encourage agency and transcendence by presenting life as a struggle to be waged and won. As resources of human agency and transcendence these cultural sayings emphasize that ‘[h]uman beings achieve authenticity as they create and recreate, invent and reinvent, construct and deconstruct processes and systems. People become what they are because they have energy to live. When people lose energy to live, they also lose life’ (Muhwati 2010:156).

These sayings charge African people to be responsible and use their agency and transcendence to overcome their undesirable socioeconomic situations. As life-giving and energy-reviving resources, these proverbial sayings assert that ‘[p]eople are not born to passively accept death but to challenge it by working out various mechanisms that defend the right to life’ (Muhwati 2010:159).

The Contemporary Cultural Demand for Human Agency and Transcendence

The call for agency and transcendence is also a prominent feature of modern culture as represented in contemporary popular music. Musicians use their songs to convey contemporary wisdom and instruction. They are not only entertainers, but also social commentators, protestors, social teachers, as well as motivational teachers. While some songs derive their material from conventional proverbs, for example Brenda Fassie’s song, *Umntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*, other musicians create new sayings that call for human agency and transcendence. Zimbabwean singer, Paul Matavire, in his song *Tanga Wandida* (‘you must first love me’) popularized the chiShona dirge that mocks people who die from thirst while their feet are in the water, *kufa nenyota makumbo ari mumvura*, to deride people who do not take full advantage of the resources and opportunities around them. People must use their agency and transcendence by

using the resources around them to improve their lives. However, one can controvert the dirge by pointing out that it is possible to die of thirst while stepping on water because some waters are not usable or suitable for purpose.

Similarly, the popular South African *mbaqanga* musical group, Soul Brothers, have several songs that proclaim that life is a difficult struggle, but must be actively engaged head-on. In some of their songs, they reject the dependency syndrome and parasitic attitudes. In their song, *Ngidlala Ukhlupheka*, loosely translated as ‘I am playing or living suffering’, Soul Brothers affirm that life is not an easy task, but a difficult one. In their songs, *Kuyasinda* (‘it is a heavy burden’) and *Kulukhuni Ukuba Yindoda* (‘it is a heavy burden to be a man’), they warn about and mourn that, for a man, life is a difficult task, as they age after enduring much suffering and much sacrifice. By singing songs that proclaim the struggles endured by men, Soul Brothers can be criticized for a patriarchal attitude that focuses solely on the suffering endured by men, as if women have easy lives, when, in fact, women endure the harshest burdens and are arguably the most oppressed and marginalized class of people. However, the gist of the message of these songs is that life is not a walk in the park – it is a treacherous journey that leaves you with many painful scars. Therefore, those who want to live a victorious life must be prepared for a long, hard battle.

In some of their songs, Soul Brothers rebuke lazy people, who do no work and depend on others. For instance, in *Amanikiniki*, a wife rebukes her lazy husband who is reliant on her to do everything for him. The song rebukes the man who, despite seeing how dire both the economic situation and famine are, still wants other people to do things for him. The implied meaning of the song is an unstated call to wake up and do things for oneself – *vuka uzenzele*. The message of Soul Brothers is that, regardless of how difficult and complicated life may be, no one should resign themselves to what Muhwati (2010:152) describes as a dependency syndrome, victimhood, hopelessness, helplessness, lifelessness, and life-weary pessimism. Agency and transcendence relate to being authentically human. Like the many African proverbs, these songs ‘remind and encourage African men and women to live life as an existential franchise that calls for perpetual agency and transcendence’ (Muhwati 2010:152). These proverbs, idioms, and songs are examples of how African cultures repudiate laziness and resignation and emphatically demand human agency and transcendence from its people.

The Fostering of the Blame Syndrome in a Spiritual View of the Economy

What implications does the African religious worldview of material wealth as a product of spiritual or magical power have on human responsibility in a poverty-stricken Africa? A major weakness in the African magical and spiritual understanding of the economy is the abrogation of human responsibility that blames poverty on adverse spiritual conditions such as witchcraft and various other spiritual powers. The extent to which the spiritual economy harms human responsibility by promoting the blame syndrome is described in the following excerpt from Mbiti (1969:209):

Every form of pain, misfortune, sorrow or suffering; every illness and sickness; every death whether of an old man or of the infant child; every failure of the crop in the fields, of hunting in the wilderness or of fishing in the waters; every bad omen or dream: These and all the other manifestations of evil that man experiences are blamed on somebody in the corporate society.

Thus, while there are many ancient and cultural sayings that demand people to be responsible by using their human agency and transcendence, the dominant spiritual framework of cause and effect promotes a ‘blame syndrome’ (Neequaye 2013:213). Mbiti (1969:209) emphasizes this blame syndrome, stating: ‘Natural explanations may indeed be found, but mystical explanations must also be given. People create scapegoats for their sorrows’.

It can, however, be stated that the African tenet of *ubuntu* instils responsibility in African communities because to be *umuntu* is to be different from animals that follow their instincts instead of critical reason. According to Neequaye (2013:190), in African communities, individuals are accountable for their actions although all community members are expected to contribute towards the wellbeing of the entire community. Neequaye (2013:190) adds, ‘[A]ny individual whose action disturbs the peace or destabilizes the stability for the community will be held responsible for his/her actions’. Neequaye further amplifies Gyekye’s observation that ‘the achievements, success, and well-being of the group depend on the exercise by its individual members to their unique talents and qualities. And these talents and qualities are assets of the community as a whole’ (Gyekye 1996:49-50). This affirms the full extent

to which individual success and the community's success are all mutually interdependent. To succeed, individuals need the community, while the community needs individuals to exercise their gifts. Furthermore, responsibility is also affirmed by the African conception of ancestorhood, for only those who have been responsible for their communities qualify to be ancestors (Neequaye 2013:195). Therefore, since ancestorhood is the aspiration of all good people, they all prepare for it by being honorable and responsible people who fulfil their obligations during their lifetime.

Nonetheless, the belief that prosperity is a product of spiritual action compromises human effort by motivating people to believe that regardless of their planning and hard work, their success is ultimately controlled by their spiritual condition. Lazarus (2019:6 of 20) explains that, in the ATRs, the origins of all aspects of life – wealth, health, death, and happiness – are in the spiritual realm. It is therefore believed that the spirit world rewards people with whom it has a good relationship, with material things that make life good and enjoyable. Conversely, the spiritual world withholds these good things from people who are disconnected from them. The prominence of this perception implies that, while hard work is affirmed and laziness is despised, the spiritualization of wealth and prosperity means that spiritual conditions are valued more highly than human actions.

The spiritualistic approach to material wealth that undermines human responsibility stems from a notion of limited vital force. While Tempels uses the notion of vital force to portray Africans as inferior to Europeans, it is difficult to dispute his analysis that ATRs are based on the quest for vital force for a thriving life. Magesa (1997:52) critically endorses Tempels' notion of vital forces by stating that the 'sole purpose of existence [in ATR] is to seek life, to see to it that human life continues and grows to its full capacity'. Matolino (2011:338) challenges Tempels' concept of vital force by questioning why Tempels did not find any Luba or Bantu terminology that corresponds with this notion of vital force and argues that Tempels has fabricated the notion for potentially prejudiced racial reasons, with the intention of depicting Africans as inferior to Europeans.

While it can be challenging to find a single term in African languages that precisely captures the concept of 'vital force', the essence of spiritual power derived from a connection to the spiritual world can be articulated using the isiNdebele terms *amandla* ('power') and *inhlanhla* ('good luck and blessedness'). Notions such as power, good luck, and blessed *ukubusiseka*

highlight connection with the good ancestral spirits *amadlozi amahle* which indicate the link between economic wellbeing and spirituality. *Amandla* embodies the idea of conquering power that overcomes impediments to one's success and defends one's sources of wealth from evil attacks. *Inhlanhla* and *ukubusiseka* represent a favorable state or a state of blessedness that results from having positive relations with the spiritual world and brings good things to the people and shields them from bad things and misfortunes.

Notions such as bad luck *umnyama*, cursed *ukuqalekiswa* or *ukuthukwa* and bad/evil ancestors *amadlozi amabi* are negative idioms that indicate an undesirable relation between economic wellbeing and spirituality that drives away fortune and progress and leaves people in poverty. All these evil spiritual aspects that stand in the paths to one's success or destroy people's economic resources and their personal power to prosper, belong to the undesirable condition denoted by the isiNdebele term *umnyama* which is a state of being enveloped by darkness, with reference to ill-luck or bad luck. To have *umnyama* essentially means to be in a weak spiritual state that permits evil spirits to steal one's economic power leaving them with power. Therefore, Africans invest heavily in rituals and processes that drive away *umnyama* and bring or give them *inhlanhla* to attract wealth and *amandla* in gaining wealth. In this perspective people blame their lack of success to a state of bad luck *umnyama* or a state of weakness or loss of power. The abundance of African traditional experts specializing in magic and rituals to give people a disposition of attracting wealth and the power to accumulate it gives credence to Tempels' assessment that ATRs thrive on providing the vital forces.

This reliance on magical powers has a serious and negative effect on human responsibility by stifling human agency and transcendence in many African communities. Van Rooy (1999:243) analyzes it as follows:

But if one puts one's confidence in these fetishes, it becomes unnecessary to prepare for examinations, or to 'care for' one's fields and put something back into them, or to drive carefully, or to eliminate one's unfavourable traits of character, or to really work at building up a healthy marriage, or even to run a country efficiently. Magic will take care of all that in an instant!

In this situation human responsibility is stifled by determinism and fatalism. Determinism leads to a fatalistic resignation to the belief that a person can do

nothing to change whatever has been determined in the spiritual realm. Thus, many Africans end up fatalistically resigning themselves to poverty, without a serious attempt to change their economic situation. For example, it is common among vaShona to hear people blame their mistakes, losses, and failures to the invasion of *mashavi eurombo* – the evil spirits that bring poverty. The problem is that, instead of people examining their methods and determining what caused them to fail, they find a convenient scapegoat in bad luck, witchcraft, or evil ancestors and generational curses. This tendency also has a negative effect on those who prosper because, instead of crediting hard work, they give credit to their stronger magic or better spiritual condition that has enabled them to make the limited cosmic mystical power work for them (Van Rooy 1999:243).

Furthermore, the prominence of the idea of prosperity as a product of spiritual action or magical power damages human agency and transcendence by causing people to be afraid to excel in their endeavors, lest they are accused of prospering from using witchcraft. Comaroff and Comaroff (1999:279, 287) report that there are many incidents of violent treatment of people in Africa accused of accumulating wealth through illicit means. Therefore, some people are afraid of prosperity because of fear that their relatives may accuse them of prospering through witchcraft. There is also the crippling belief that to be rich or to excel in life means one becomes a target of witchcraft from jealous people. These fears cause people to feel secure when they achieve the minimum, even though greater achievements are possible.

Towards a Responsibility Affirming African Framework of Human Agency and Transcendence

A critical starting point towards a framework of human wellbeing that affirms human responsibility, is to emphasize production over consumption. The criticism levelled against the Pentecostal prosperity gospel of celebrating consumption rather than production (cf. Heuser 2016:4 of 9) is also applicable to the ATRs' magical approach to economic life that only focuses on the part of consuming without considering the hard work put in the gathering of the ingredients. Instead of inculcating human responsibility by empowering people to use their agency to confront and transcend the structural issues hindering people from attaining human wellbeing, this approach focuses on the magical process of amassing wealth. The focus is invested on what can bring wealth

quickly and does not focus on what people should do to engage and transform the prevailing unfavorable structures.

In the contemporary southern African context marked by high socioeconomic inequality and ineffective and corrupt national governance that has failed to deliver sound economic systems to the citizens, the spiritualistic perception of material reality has notions of defeatism and escapism. It is defeatism in the sense that people embrace a spiritualistic perception of reality from defeat by the elusive economy because of its unequal structural nature. It is escapism because instead of people taking responsibility and using their agency and transcendence to confront the structural elements that are hindering them from attaining economic wellbeing, they escape to magical and spiritual solutions hoping that they can miraculously attain wealth. Instead of blaming the structural elements, blame is escapistically placed on imaginary evil spiritual forces. This is a kind of both defeatism and escapism that allow structural inequalities to remain and entrench themselves, thus further deepening poverty in society. Biri and Manyonganise (2022:8 of 10) rightly state that from an economic perspective, blaming witches and witchcraft for one's poverty 'is a form of escapism'. As a form of escapism, '[b]elievers vent their frustrations on witches as causative agents of their misery and retrogression. This belief is crucial in measuring the level of empowerment and development within the community. It appears to be one way of avoiding responsibility and accountability by congregants, as they claim that miracles cause success' (Biri & Manyonganise 2022:8 of 10).

These defeatist and escapist approaches must be confronted by agency and transcendence because they have a negative impact on people's ability to be responsible for their situation as they think their salvation lies in magic and spiritual conditions. They blame their poverty on witchcraft and ignore the fact that the 'economic environment does not provide opportunities for entrepreneurship and other gateways to success for many people, regardless of whether they are professionally trained' (Biri & Manyonganise 2022:8 of 10). The magical and spiritual approach to material wellbeing in Africa has a disempowering effect on the poor because '[i]nstead of confronting their lived socio-economic realities, they spend time wrestling with perceived spiritual forces' (Biri & Manyonganise 2022:8 of 10). Therefore human responsibility is stifled by a defeatist and escapist approach that avoids confronting structural and political ills, such as inequality, corruption, and poor leadership that have destroyed the economy while people opt for 'spiritual diagnosis of poverty as

the acts of the devil and the consequences of witchcraft activities' (Biri & Manyonganise 2022:8 of 10). There is a need for people to realize that poverty and economic powerlessness are essentially structural issues that cannot be addressed by merely appeasing the ancestors but through exercising human responsibility.

Conclusion

This article utilized an African traditional religious and cultural analysis of human responsibility as expressed by proverbs and idioms that demand human agency and transcendence in the chiShona, isiNdebele, and isiZulu languages. The same pattern of thought can be found in other African religious worldviews where spirituality is linked with material prosperity. I have argued that this spiritualization of material wealth undermines human responsibility by creating a reliance on magic and spiritual powers to gain wealth instead of human effort and ingenuity. Therefore, as Ngong (2012:146) points out, one must resist the tendency by some anthropologists and scholars of African religions to treat beliefs in magic and witchcraft 'as somehow essential to modern African imagination' instead of problematizing such beliefs 'for being inimical to an imagination that may lead to economic development'. This spiritualistic perception promotes defeatist escapism that flees to magic and spirituality instead of confronting socioeconomic and political structures that impoverish people and further hinder them from meaningfully engaging and addressing their poverty. Therefore, there is a need for Africans to conceive their poverty structurally and not just spiritually or magically. While spiritual factors such as bad luck, witches, and sorcerers cannot be denied, it must be noted that poverty is primarily a structural problem that requires the dismantling of evil and oppressive structures. Human responsibility calls for agency and transcendence and challenges the adoption of victimhood by affirming the necessity of human energy and creativity in confronting the vagaries of life in a poverty-riddled Africa (Muhwati 2010:154).

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