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### **Collectivism vs. Individualism; Reading the Scripture through Honor-Shame Lenses for Community-based African Cultures**

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#### *Abstract*

In recent studies, honor and shame has gained quite amount of attention from scholars: anthropologists and psychologists. However, theologians have on the other hand overlooked this pervasive yet critical human phenomenon. There seems to be a paucity of theological resources whereby to engage honor and shame related issues in community and collective based societies. While this is a trendy subject in other disciplines, it deserves a great deal of attention in black reflections on Christian studies. Moreover, it is critical that whenever Biblical studies are in engagement with social-political that honor and shame is surfaced. This is because, honor and shame, being pivotal cultural values of the Ancient Mediterranean world where the Bible was written are also present in most African societies today. Unfortunately, current theological discourse doesn't engage honor-shame as a cultural and theological component to Biblical studies.

Therefore, this paper will firstly demonstrate how the theme of honor and shame is pervasive throughout the Bible. Secondly, the paper will argue that while honor and shame are replete in the Scripture, seem to be missing in Biblical studies as well as in African Christianity. Thirdly, the paper will argue how cultural values of honor and shame have played a significant role in shaping morality and behavior in collective and shame-based societies. Lastly, while different shades of honor/shame can be negative, the paper will suggest ways in which a biblical

view of the same can be leveraged upon to redeem biblical morality and ethics in community based societies. The goal is to open a conversation in black reflections on Biblical studies whereby honor-shame theology and missiology is mainstreamed in the academia as well in church pews.

### *Definition of honor and shame*

Honor is “a person’s social worth, one’s value in the eyes of the community. Honor is when other people think well of you resulting in harmonious social bonds in the community.”<sup>1</sup> Honor always almost carries with it a communal aspect. As the New Testament scholar and sociologist Malina holds that, honor is “worth or value of person both in their eyes and in the eyes (that is one’s claim to worth) plus that person’s value in the eyes of his or her social group.”<sup>2</sup> In this sense, honor carries with it the connotation of one’s view of self within the group; village, neighborhood, tribe, or society.

Shame on the other hand is “a negative public rating: a community thinks lowly of you.”<sup>3</sup> In the event of shame, one gets severed from the community. It is “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”<sup>4</sup> While cultural or social shame measures one’s worth in relation to social expectations, “theological (sacred) shame is ascribed to those who lack honor before God.”<sup>5</sup> Psalm 44: 13, 15 attests to these definitions. “You make us a *reproach* to our neighbors, A *scoffing* and a *derision*

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<sup>1</sup> Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (Timē Press, 2014), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2012), 109.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson Wu, “Does the ‘Plan of Salvation’ Make Disciples? Why Honor and Shame Are Essential For Christian Ministry,” *Asian Missions Advance*, Leadership Development for the 21st Century Mission Part 2, 50, no. Jan 2016 (January 2016): 12.

to those around us. You make us a *byword* among the nations, A *laughingstock* among the people. All day long my *dishonor* is before me. And my *humiliation* has overwhelmed me,” (NASB, emphasis added). In honor-shame based African cultures, shame is not negative; shaming is. “Shame is a good thing; it indicates that you and your community know the proper way to behave.”<sup>6</sup>

***Comparative comparisons***

<i>Individualistic societies</i>	<i>Collectivistic societies</i>
Focuses on the individual achievement(s) and self-reliance	Focuses on the group’s values of honor and to shun away shame
“Self” is established by who I set out or choose to become.	“Self” is established primarily by one’s family and community.
Tend to be more guilt-innocence oriented.	Tend to be mostly shame-honor oriented.

***African Cultures and Honor-Shame***

Unlike Western’s individualism, African societies are more group oriented as opposed to Western’s individualism. Renown African scholar Mbiti made the statement that ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.’ Like in most collectivistic societies, African societies, the individual is inside the group. African cultures are inherently honor-shame. Languages use different words to talk about honor and shame, such as: glory, reputation, status, dignity, or worth.

***Honor-Shame and Biblical Theology in Africa***

Lately, Biblical scholars are starting to appreciate the theme of honor and shame that colors the Bible. The Bible is replete with honor and shame language. Yet Africans were not

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<sup>6</sup> E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2012), Kindle location: 1273 of 2703.

taught to understand salvation as honor-status reversal in faith communities. Nicholls has lamented that “Christian theologians rarely if ever stressed salvation as honoring God, exposure of sin as shame, and the need for acceptance and the restoration of honor.”<sup>7</sup> This is to mean that African theology is still dominated by Western’s guilt-innocence paradigm. Tennent in his book contends that,

a survey of all of the leading textbooks used in teaching systematic theology across the major theological traditions reveals that although the indexes are filled with references to guilt, the word ‘shame’ appears in the index of only one of these textbooks.<sup>8</sup>

Most theological training resources in Africa are from the West and quiet often taught by Westerners or Africans with great training from the West. Tennent continues,

“This omission continues to persist despite the fact that the term guilt and its various derivatives occur 145 times in the OT and 10 times in the NT, whereas the term shame and its derivatives occur nearly 300 times in the OT and 45 times in the NT.”<sup>9</sup>

This presents risk for a potential cultural and theological blind spot on honor and shame.

### ***Honor-Shame in the Bible***

The Ancient Mediterranean societies were highly honor-shame based. New Testament scholar Jerome Neyrey emphasizes that understanding the social system of an ancient culture is vital for interpreting its literature. Recent studies have revealed that African cultural values have similarities with the Ancient Mediterranean value system of honor and shame. Another African

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce Nicholls, “The Role of Shame and Guilt in a Theology of Cross-Cultural Mission,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Evangelical Review of Theology, 25, no. 3 (2001): 232.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 92.

<sup>9</sup> Tennent, 93.

Biblical scholar Mahlangu opines that, “It is shown that the African interacts and transacts with the New Testament with his/her own value system in which these values are also encountered.”<sup>10</sup>

Honor and shame is pervasive in the Bible. For example, following are some of the key shame-honor verses. Gen. 2:28; Rom. 3:23; Is. 54:4; Ps. 62:7; 1 Sam. 2:8.

- Gen. 2:25: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not shamed.”
- Rom. 3:23: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
- Is. 54:4: “Fear not, “for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.”
- Ps. 62:7: “On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God.”
- 1 Sam. 2:8: “He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.”
- Is. 53:3: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”
- Phil. 2:8-9: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,”
- Rom. 10:11: “For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’”

### *Honor-Shame and the Unit of Salvation in Africa*

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<sup>10</sup> E. Mahlangu, “The Ancient Mediterranean Values of Honour and Shame as a Hermeneutical Procedure: A Social-Scientific Criticism in an African Perspective,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 22, no. 1 (2001): 85.

The standard known personal salvation may not resonate well with the African Christianity. Reading the Bible through honor-shame lenses helps readers appreciate some of the difficult passages in the New Testament concerning the matter of the process of Christian conversion. Group decisions to follow Jesus Christ are made based on the community's notions of honor. Tennent puts it that;

In a dyadistic culture, there is a powerful social mechanism whereby you are dependent on others for your psychological existence and feel shame if the image of yourself does not agree with the image shared and believed by others.<sup>11</sup>

In Africa, it is very common for families, clans, tribes or even the entire people groups to collectively experience conversion on the same day. Therefore, the language of personal salvation even commonly used may not always resonate with the people's religious experience. This is neither a new phenomenon on the African soil nor a strange occurrence in the Biblical story. Apparently this is a very unfamiliar ground in Western context where individual confession and repentance is imperative before personal salvation. Historian Mark Noll puts it that,

Protestant evangelicals usually think that salvation is one by one, as individuals come to develop 'a personal relationship with Christ.' But much of the emerging Christian world has not experienced conversion individually. Conversion, instead, has taken place by families, villages, or even lineages extending back in time. Group conversion is not without historic precedent.<sup>12</sup>

Consider passages like Acts 11:14; 16:15, 31,34, 18:8. Peter narrating his spiritual experience while in Judea to the Church in Jerusalem widens the unit of salvation for the people. The angel speaking to Peter said, "he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, *you and your household*" (Acts 11:14, *emphasis added*). Also, when the Lord opened the eyes of

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<sup>11</sup> Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology*, 95.

<sup>12</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), Kindle Location 313 of 2322.

Lydia, from the city of Thyatira to understand what was being said by Paul, the Bible records that; "... she was baptized, and *her household as well, ...*" (Acts 16:15, *emphasis added*). Again, this is yet another spiritual encounter where conversion is collectively experienced on account of the household's leader. After Paul and Silas' miraculous freedom from the prison, the Philippian jailer who was contemplating suicide heard the gospel from the two. The Apostle Paul's words to the jailer were "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, *you and your household*" (Acts 16:31, *emphasis added*). Later on in the same passage there is evidence of group conversion on account of the patriarch of the house. Lastly, in the Acts of the Apostles' account, is a record of another collectivistic approach to salvation. Paul preaching in Athens together with Timothy and Silas witness Crispus' salvation. "Crispus the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, *together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized*" (Acts 18:8, *emphasis added*).

These collective salvation encounters which are very common to the African spiritual experience of renewal and conversion are dependent on patronage. Most African societies are patriarchal, thus patronage by default is their social economic system where transactions are done. Patronage by definition is the means of transacting favors in exchange of honor in the public sphere. Thus when a respectable in a collectivistic society converts to Christianity, he or she gains access to honor and grace. For this grace to be exchanged with the rest of the household, the group has to become like the patron. The Holy Spirit working through this social context imparted salvation to an entire household in the Biblical record. The same phenomenon has been replicated in the African salvation experience. Thus while some people in Africa have converted individually, it is common for the unit of salvation to be redefined collectively. Hence, entire households convert based on the household leader, the patron.

## *Honor-Shame and Biblical Morality in Africa*

Morality in collectivistic cultures which is governed by honor-shame values is distinct from Western's understanding of the same. Western missionaries working in Africa are quite often perplexed by the absence of guilt for sin. Freeman, a missionary in Botswana observes:

Like many others, we have been perplexed and troubled at the shallowness and hidden sin in the Church. Until I came to understand the role of honor/shame dynamics in our context, I often wondered, 'Why does there seem to be no sense of guilt here, except when there is also shame in getting caught?'<sup>13</sup>

Due to honor-shame dynamics at work in the African context, biblical morality is understood relationally. The intricate relationship of the individual within the group shapes one's behavior. Georges observes that, "In shame-based cultures, the stigma of social disapproval and rejection shapes behavior. The threat of being exposed for failures or flaws triggers shame."<sup>14</sup> This is not a twisted way of interpreting morality in the African experience. Rather, honor and shame social values play a critical role in shaping morality and ethics. Georges adds that, "Honor and shame cultures define morality relationally and concretely, not legally or abstractly – what is best for relationships is morally right; what brings shame is wrong."<sup>15</sup> Sin in Africa always affects the other person or the group, hence morality is also collective. What follows is a biblical case from the Scripture in the story of David's sin with Bathsheba.

### *The Case of David's Sin (2 Sam. 11-12)*

Apparently, in view of honor-shame dynamics that played in the Ancient Mediterranean cultures, as earlier noted, there may have been a misreading of this biblical account. Where does

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<sup>13</sup> Sandra Freeman, "Honor/Shame Dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Mission Frontiers*, February 2015, 32.

<sup>14</sup> Jayson Georges, "'They Don't Feel Guilty?!?': Ethics and Discipleship in Honor-Shame Cultures" (SEANET, 2016), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Georges, 4.

the misreading of this story come from? Do we miss the undercurrent of honor and shame in this story? The interpretation of David's sin and his confession of the same before God is quite often misread. Randolph comments that, "We typically assume that David was aware of his sin but stubbornly refused to repent. Then, when Nathan confronts David, his conscience is pricked, he gives in to his inner conviction and he publicly repents."<sup>16</sup> Thus common interpretations make the assumption that David gives in to inner conviction and he publicly repents. That far is quiet often misread when honor-shame dynamics that play role in the Ancient Mediterranean cultures of David's time are ignored.

The entire story of David and Bathsheba is steeped in honor and shame language. Richards and O'Brien<sup>17</sup> make the following observations in a sequence:

- David was where he was not supposed to be (in the palace) – David was not acting honorably as a king (2 Sam. 11:1)
- Bathsheba is out in the night bathing openly (women then and now don't bathe openly); she was strategically bathing out where the king would notice her.
- David likes her and sent someone to find out about her (2 Sam. 11:2-3)
- "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" (2 Sam. 11:3)
- The whole affair was not private, it was made public the moment David sent out his servant to enquire and eventually to bring her to him.
- The narrator wants us to see the conflict between David and Uriah (refers to Bathsheba as Uriah's wife).

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<sup>16</sup> Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*, Kindle Location: 1291 of 2703.

<sup>17</sup> Richards and O'Brien, Kindle Location: 1291 of 2703.

- The text pours on shame by saying that Bathsheba was “sent away”, not “she left”.
- The wife of Uriah is shamed – David didn’t keep her.

### *What was David’s Sin?*

Having the above observations made one wonders, then, what was David’s sin? The common interpretation is made that, David started by breaking the tenth commandment (coveting, Ex. 20:17), then the seventh (adultery, Ex. 20:14), and then the sixth (murder, Ex. 20:13), while the Lord silently watched his behavior. Common misreading assumes that the Lord calls him to account for standing above the law ... Nathan apparently asks David to intervene in a legal matter. Through honor-shame lenses, that may not have been the case!

The text actually states that David’s actions “despised” (shamed) God. David’s action is not viewed as failure to keep the law, but the failure to rightly honor God. “Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in the eyes of the Lord” (2 Sam. 12:9). The word of the Lord here does not mean the Bible, the law, or legal commandments. Rather, the “word of the Lord” is the promise God made to David, (2 Sam. 7:7-14). “You have despised the Lord” (2 Sam. 12:10) is the root of the problem. “By this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord” (2 Sam. 12:14). Is sin ever seen and explained this way, that is, as despising God and not necessarily breaking the law?

In the African worldview, a legal framework for explaining sin is often in the abstract. But sin seen as ‘shaming an honorable benefactor’ is more concrete in a collectivistic African context. Bediako, a Ghanaian scholar and theologian is quoted by Georges to link the essence of sin with the collectiveness of the society.

Some suggest that ours is a ‘shame culture’ and not a ‘guilt culture’, on the grounds that public acceptance determines morality, and consequently a ‘sense of sin’ is said to be absent. However, in our [African] tradition, the essence of sin is in its being an antisocial act. This makes sin basically injury to the interests of another person and damage to the collective life of the group.<sup>18</sup>

In this context, sin breaks covenant with both humans and God. Shame bears a public and objective characteristic to sin.

### ***Conclusion***

If African societies are collectivistic, shame-based cultures, and the Ancient Bible cultures were collectivistic and steeped in honor-shame, then the Bible is already contextualized for the African readers. The role of pastors, teachers, and missiologists is to be matchmakers for a more fruitful evangelism and discipleship in Africa.

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<sup>18</sup> Georges, “‘They Don’t Feel Guilty?!’: Ethics and Discipleship in Honor-Shame Cultures,” 4.

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