

Faith, culture and youth ministry in South Africa

The impact of traditional cultural practices on the faith formation of youth

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Abstract

Postmodern youth are deeply spiritual. These youth sometimes do not even call themselves religious, yet at the root of their postmodern pluralism and relativism, they have a deep hunger for God. It is for this reason that congregations need to do everything possible to engage these youth, assisting them in their quest for faith and growth in that faith. However, this should be done in a responsible and effective way. This paper explores the relationship that culture has in the faith formation of the youth. In this sense, it reflects on the church's mission to young people as they wrestle with the tensions they may experience between faith and culture. Due to the diversity of culture and faith in South Africa, attention is focussed on examples of traditional practices that involve youth from various African cultures. Theological reflection on the religious aspects of culture and society, as well as the spiritual dimension of individual life are prioritised.

Keywords: youth, culture, faith formation, South Africa, initiation, virginity testing, circumcision

1. Introduction

A recent study by Weber (2014) found that the cultural backgrounds (and practices) of young people influence their faith formation. With culture being a vast area of research; this paper focusses on one aspect thereof, namely the relationship between youth faith formation and traditional cultural practice. At the 2016 Joint Theological Societies conference held at the University of Pretoria, in his keynote address on "Religion as Identity Marker", Professor Tinyiko Maluleke noted the importance of distinguishing one's religious identity with the concepts of religion and identity. He argued that the religious identity of an African is intertwined with who one is socially and spiritually. There is no separation of the two. At the same conference in a different plenary address, Jaco Beyers (2016) echoed that religion does indeed become an identity marker because religion is a cultural expression. He added that this religion can either embrace or deny culture. My experience in

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urban youth ministry has often been met with young people from various cultural backgrounds wrestling with their newly found identity in Christ. By this I mean that many of these youth, specifically Black South African youth, come to faith in Christ asking the question; “What in my culture should I leave?” Some of these youth have been at the age when traditional rites of passage within their culture need to be observed, but are uncertain whether this observance would impact their relationship with Christ. Others have however not felt any tension between the two (their faith and their culture). David Ndegwah (in Selvam & Watt, 2014:39-40), a lecturer at Jomo Kenyatta University in Nairobi, agrees that the youth experience this tension. Ndegwah’s research focus is on youth substance abuse, noting that one of the challenges in postmodern Africa is that the traditional family context has changed, making it even tougher for youth to make the difficult decisions they are faced with. This tension between one’s faith and the cultural decisions one needs to make does not seem new. As early as 1967 John Mbiti (1970:xvi) cautioned that “(m) any individuals are becoming increasingly detached from the corpus of their tribal and traditional beliefs, concepts, and practices. One the other hand, these concepts have not all been abandoned, nor are they likely to be wiped out immediately by these modern changes.”

According to Jurgens (2018:10):

... the manifestation of culture on the African continent, as we have presented it, is all-embracing and flies effortlessly across the spectrum from food to fashion, soccer to the sounds of Afrobeat, religion to the Congolese rumba and beyond... It is an exciting time to be African.

Chifeche (2018:90) supports this view of culture adding that “culture is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or a social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes and styles of life of which has the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs. It is evident that culture is part and parcel of a person’s very being. De Beer and Swart (2014:3) argue that “...the African urban landscape, despite being the last continent to urbanise, is fast changing with its own sets of challenges. Often accompanied by vast urban informal settlements, resulting from millions constantly migrating to cities, and struggling to make sense of urban management and development in such contexts, it becomes a hotbed for urban debate, urban social movements and urban innovations.” These youth live in a culture of consumption, style and leisure. Ugor (2015:4-6) traces their onset to the “counter-cultural movements among the working-class youth of post-World War II economic boom in Britain and the United States. Prior to the 1970’s, state

capitalism created for the interest of all, creating opportunities and hope for its youth whilst young people from the 1980's onwards expressed an urgent concern with survival emphasizing an interconnectivity between young people's restless behaviour and global economic issues." This paper focuses primarily on youth in urban contexts because this is where I have seen the tension between faith and culture manifest itself. It is in such pluralistic and diverse contexts that the church (including these youth) is called to be missional. One of the challenges of youth ministry in a multiracial and multicultural South Africa, has been that the faith formation processes for youth are not aligned with the cultural contexts in which these youth find themselves.

Youth culture is expressed by the empirically observable behaviour and attitudes of youths, for example, through language and, clothing style, tattoos, body marks, music, films and television shows, art, and who their role models are. It is important to understand their lifestyle. This requires some kind of an understanding and relationship with the youth and a non-judgmental attitude when engaging young people. Youth culture should be viewed as social norms and values, which are identified and contextualised through different options, diversity and choice. This also leads to a greater diversity of attitudes towards sexual morality than how youth used to live in the past. In the modern and postmodern context, people should be free to make choices, even moral choices, in terms of individual preference (Chifeche, 2018:90-91)

Nel (2010:15-16) argues that faith formation processes with young people are essentially missional in South Africa's diversity of youth experiences, meanings, and backgrounds. The research question being investigated here is "*How can youth ministry address the tensions between culture and faith when guiding South African youth in their faith formation journey?*" As young people on mission, attention to the context in which youth faith formation take place is critical to understanding youth in South Africa. Reflecting on South African research in missiology over a 10-year period, Mangayi and Baron (2020:4) note that many missiologists understand mission to be people-centred rather than programme centred. Young people participate in mission. Contrary to what is often believed to be the case, the so-called postmodern youth are deeply spiritual (Mueller, 2006:107; Powell, et al., 2011:60). These youth do not necessarily adhere to any one particular faith group because many have become disillusioned by orthodox Christianity in which rules are seen as the final authority. In fact, these youth sometimes do not even call themselves religious, yet at the root of their postmodern pluralism and relativism, these youth have a deep hunger for God (ibid). As agents of change in a post-apartheid South Africa, these youth are no longer merely the objects or empty receivers of the

well-meaning projects, ministry and outreach of adults, the church or experts, but have become agents of their own contextual missional theologies, communicated through new images (Weber, 2014:240). It is for this reason that congregations need to do everything possible to engage these youth, assisting them in their quest for faith and growth in that faith, however this should be done in a responsible and effective way (Mueller, 2006:107-108). In this sense, this article calls for a missional approach to youth ministry which acknowledges the agency of youth within their faith formation as it relates to inclusion of the cultural identities these youth embody.

2. Youth faith formation

Writing on “Mediation and contemplative practice among young adults in Nairobi”, Sahaya Selvam and Dominic Mwangi (in Selvam & Watt, 2014:67-83) note that urban youth in Nairobi have become individualised in their religion. Their research focussed on one mode of faith formation, contemplative prayer, and the role this plays in daily situations these youth face. The study found that youth who practice contemplative prayer experience God within the silence thereof. There are many different ways in which faith formation is understood, dependant on the contexts. Many times it is referred to as the example above; prayer being one way of enhancing faith formation. Other ways (which I refer to as modes) are confirmation, baptism, Bible study, worship, and so forth. The overarching understanding of faith formation used in this paper describes *faith formation as the ecclesial process towards spiritual growth*. This process includes the consideration of developmental theories (identity, moral, and faith) and Christian practices used by the faith community in order to promote a Christ-like lifestyle in the lives of its youth. The understanding of faith formation here includes discipleship, spiritual growth, and maturity as part of this process (Weber, 2014:32, 70ff). This then asserts an understanding of faith as lifestyle and not only doctrinal belief. The thrust for our current discussion is in this process and what is happening as these youth are growing or not growing in their faith.

Michael (2013:5) argues that the marginalisation of African voices have impacted our Christian identity because it is still accepted as European and De-Africanised faith. He continues to say that “...African people as well as African Christians are still groping in the dark to understand the true essence of the Christian faith.” This is evident among young people and why we need to take the faith formation within their cultural context seriously. The “...Christian faith in Africa has refused to seriously engage African tradition at a deeper level of engagement, but has merely scratched the surface of the African cultural consciousness ...” (Michael, 2013:5). Two important components of this faith journey within which African youth find

themselves are the role their family play and the cultural practices that affect them. As noted above, this paper is interested in how these influence the faith formation of Black South African youth.

2.1 The integral role of family

Families have extraordinary power to shape the lives of their youth because parents (be it biological or not) are essential actors in their faith journey (Strommen & Hardel, 2000:7). Traditional African cultures emphasise the role of families when it comes to raising young people (Healey & Sybertz, 1996; Bujo & Muya, 2005). In these faith communities, faith nurturing by the church starts at the family because faith is a relational issue to youth. Therefore, the best biblical interpretation of who God is will be experienced in the family as the most consistent relational model they have (Maiko, 2007:58). The conversations and stories parents and grandparents tell about God should be so contagious that it motivates youth to have a relationship with God (Strommen & Hardel, 2000:77). This means that modelling in the home becomes crucial. How parents act, use their time, talk, and commit themselves models the values they hold. Becoming gospel-orientated parents, communicating moral values, being involved in service activities and sharing one's faith at home are all contributing factors in one's faith formation. Parents who are gospel-orientated place emphasis on studying the Word of God and on relationships rather than rules. These parents are intentional about their own spiritual growth and the growth of their children's faith as well. Youth tend to adopt the values and beliefs of their parents (*ibid.*, 84).

It should be emphasised that involvement in good works at the expense of sharing one's faith at home can be detrimental to the faith formation of youth as two separate messages are communicated. Like Israel, parents are still called to be the primary custodians of the faith (*ibid.*, 97). The College Transition project conducted in America by Powell, Griffin & Crawford (2011:117) found that most parents do not talk to their children about faith, this includes Christian parents. Some Christian parents want to pass their faith on to their children but do not know how to (Roehlkepartain in Yust, Johnstone, Sasso & Roehlkepartain; 2004:xi). Parents are often uncertain of their own faith development, resulting in them being afraid to share their faith with their teenage children because they are aware that these youth yearn for interaction through questioning and critiquing what is taught to them (Maiko, 2007:8). Their uncertainty does not make them less responsible for imparting their faith to their children. Families need to understand their own spirituality and nurture it in order to assist their children. This does not mean that all conversations between youth and their parents should evolve around issues about their faith. Parents could also take time to share how they are experiencing their

faith, including the challenges they face or have faced, and how they have dealt with these. There are parents who do not know how to nurture the faith of their children because it probably was not modelled in their own homes when they were growing up (*ibid.*, 17). Families can prepare children for this life in Christ by telling biblical stories as relevant for their stories, celebrating one's faith as life in abundance, talking to each other, discussing challenges, and faithful service towards each other and others (Caldwell in Yust, et al., 2006:328).

I noted earlier in this paper that Africans are reputable for being religious. The discussion thus far places emphasis on how Christian families can play a role in their children's faith formation. "All African people recognize one God. According to the cosmology of some, there are, besides him, other divinities and spiritual beings, some of whom are closely associated with him (but) these are mainly the personification of God's activities..." (Mbiti, 1970:29). They believe that man sinned and was separated from God. They further believe that God is to be searched for and worshipped, but do not believe in specific faith creeds because the communal body share in corporate beliefs as they live and engage with God and each other. Interestingly, the word faith is not part of their vocabulary. "To assert, however, that they have no faith in God is absolute nonsense..." (*ibid.*, 218-219). This paper acknowledges that there are various ways in which people express their faith. If we are saying that faith formation is an intentional and ongoing process in which parents and culture plays an integral role, we need to take these role players and the different contexts from which they come seriously. "Diverse African cultures vary from one country to another, and also within countries. For instance, you could say that there is a Kenyan or a Nigerian culture or a South African culture. But within the various communities/tribes in each of these countries, you have the Maasai (Kenya), the Ibo (Nigeria) and the Zulu (South Africa), each living according to their culture. The culture of each ethnic group centres on its social setting and is depicted through a number of identities such as food, marriage, dress, art, music and oral literature" (Mulunda, 2015:30). Kakonge (2015:23) further cautions that "...we cannot take a set of cultural values from one country and hope to implant them in another society." Africans share some dominant traits in their belief systems and have similar values that make them stand out from other people in the world (Mulunda, 2015:32).

Kakonge (2015:25) adds that urbanised African youth face increased pressure because of the demands of extended family members, which may prevent successful family leaders from investing in a way that could permanently improve the living standards of the entire family. Maiko's (2007) study "Youth, Faith and Culture" places emphasis on the role of African traditional culture on the faith formation of youth. Maiko stresses the importance of the Bible being taught to youth from

an African ethical and normative perspective. This, he believes, does not detract from the importance of the Christian faith while acknowledging the importance of cultural practices in the lives of young people. On the importance of culture in discussing the relationship between religion and morality, African theologian Mokgethi Motlhabi (2008:55) argues that there is a fine line between morality and religion in Africa, but that the distinction between the two should be maintained. Many cultures around the continent are now working on a more western feel due to globalisation, and the rise of internet technology and mobile communication (Mulunda, 2015:33). There are however certain jobs that Africans would not take because of cultural or sexual stereotypes. There are areas where African people display their cultural talents and are making good progress, but have had to embrace western norms of co-operation and partnership, as well as of creativity and innovation (Kakonge, 2015:26). It is within communities and cultures that young people will learn moral values and behaviours that will impact their faith and how they live out this faith. In this regard, African theologians, Benezet Buyo and Juvenal Muya (2008:96), also emphasise the importance of understanding people's cultural perceptions around faith before forcing them into a specific form of the Christian faith as passed on from missionary outreaches (ibid., 266). This view is shared by many African scholars and is based on the conviction that African people already had their own understandings of God prior to hearing the gospel from foreign missionaries.

Historically, however, missionaries were convinced that Africans had no perception of God (Kiaziku, 2009:11) and thus ignored any pre-understandings of faith and of God which was most often tied to cultural values and backgrounds and that, according to these scholars, should have been and must be taken seriously. In my previous research, a disconnection between faith and traditional cultural practices was evidenced, resulting in the youth not being able to grow in and to own their own faith (Weber, 2014:129-132). Mangayi and Baron (2020:6) remind us that the goal and motivation for being on mission with young people should be encouraging flourishing in their relationship with Jesus Christ (being more Christo-centric). By doing so, mission brings more questions to the fore constantly engaging with inter-cultural perspectives these youth bring. We now reflect on a few cultural practices that affect African youth.

2.2 Traditional cultural practices

A diversity of cultures opens South Africa to a variety of African traditional cultures. Africa has 54 countries and more than 3000 ethno-linguistic groups that do not all adhere to the same values and ways of rearing children. "Every country has its way of dressing a chicken (African proverb)" (Grobelaar, 2012:24). This makes it difficult

to define who a typical African is (ibid; Amenga-Etego in Omenyo & Anun, 2014:251-270). Malherbe (2011:128-129) confirms this challenge in stating that “African identity, therefore, is a complex issue in which place of birth, ancestry, culture, skin colour and the experience of discrimination all play a part.” Theological reflection in Africa cannot be authentic if it neglects taking the diverse contexts in which Africans find themselves into account (Grobbelaar, 2012:16). As alluded to earlier, this paper refers to Africans, specifically Black South African youth, from various cultures.

The term traditional can also be as contentious as the term African. Amenga-Etego (in Omenyo & Anun, 2014:251-270) argues that it cannot be diluted to something that has merely stagnated. “It should carry with it the dynamism with which the continent and its individual communities are currently imbued with” (ibid). Despite it alluding to something that is passed down from somewhere, its relevance is found in the application of it for the context within which it finds itself. This paper uses this term as those practices which have a cumulative historical past which creates meaning even today. My working definition of the term cultural practices includes rituals or ceremonies which create a sense of belonging to a cultural group which also reflect the community’s beliefs, views, and customs. I am also aware that the question regarding norms applicable to addressing the issue under investigation will need insights from both scholarly and social analysts into processes of faith formation.

African Christian communities place emphasis on the continuity of life through its ancestors (Otieno in Yust, et al., 2006:82). It is believed that these communities can only continue when the youth are invested in because these are a gift from the ancestors (spiritual world). Faith formation is not separated from human development in these traditions, resulting in faith practices being aligned to developmental traditional customs. These customs refer to age appropriate customs as rites of passage within African cultures.

Oral narrative rituals and practices are aimed at communal solidarity – this is intentionally taught to the younger generation (Grobbelaar, 2012:50). The faith formation of these youth is closely tied to the role of family and the ancestors during this formation process. It is difficult to separate an understanding of faith formation from an understanding of ancestral priority in these communities in which God’s omnipresence is central. Children are named after the ancestor dependant on the situation out of which they were born. Names have great meaning and are considered a spiritual affirmation of the goodness of creation (ibid., 125). Ethics and moral health are also considered essential to understanding spiritual growth. Traditional healer Mkhize (2016:2-3) writes about the sacred place of ‘umsamo’ which influences how people behave, their attitudes, and their biases. He adds that this notion of umsamo is an attempt to reclaim African Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being in opposition to Western epistemologies. He too speaks about the

tensions African people experience with the traditional cultural and Christian spiritual way of life (ibid., 4-5). Cultural change occurs as communities and households respond to social and economic shifts associated with globalisation, new technologies, environmental pressures, armed conflict, and development projects. Change also results from deliberate efforts to influence values through changes in the law or government policy, often due to pressure from civil society. Cultural values are constantly evolving rather than fixed (Chifeche, 2018:93).

It is important to note at this point how intertwined young people's faith and their traditional cultural beliefs are. It is irresponsible to conduct youth ministry with African young people without considering these connections as they will impact how these youth are spiritually formed. I now try to explain how one traditional cultural practice within various African cultures is of relevance as an example.

2.2.1 Initiation rites of passage

Initiation is seen as a spiritual occasion in a young person's life as it symbolises rebirth. Circumcision rites are emphasised in adolescent years when the young person is usually between 12 and 13 years old. It happens when youth reach puberty, but this age varies for different tribes depending on the context and the upbringing of these youth. During this time, practical knowledge about culture and life skills (cooking, hunting, etc.) are passed on to these youth. It is important to get the blessing of the ancestors while these youth are still young. African cultural tradition also stresses the importance of orthodoxy and orthopraxy when referring to the faith formation of its youth (Maiko, 2007:11-12). Oral narratives like storytelling are prioritised in passing down the faith because investing in youth is deemed imperative as they are gifts from the ancestors.

Circumcision as an initiation ceremony is practiced among many traditional African cultures (cf. Gusii of Abagusii people in Kenya, Hofriyat in Northern Sudan, Ghana, Gwambe in Mozambique in Maiko, 2007:68-74). "... Female circumcision as practiced by a number of tribes in Kenya has 'dropped off naturally'. Other aspects of culture that are being abandoned include child marriage, nomadism, and the inheritance of a wife from a dead male relative" (Mulunda, 2015:34). It is a time in which young people formerly gain solidarity with their clans of origin. Ancestors are an integral part of this process. This reflects that this one initiation rite of passage cannot be considered as separated from the broader African cosmology. It is a time of celebration in which gifts are granted, music is sung, animals are slaughtered, traditional beer (for males) is drunk, and the youth receive their clan name. The rite of passage is not merely about the young person, but about the whole community. Young people gain the respect of their community during this time. It is traditional cultural practice among both males and females. Girls go through what is called virginity testing while boys are circumcised.

(a) Girls

Cultural traditions and expectations can place disproportionate constraints on girls and challenge the physical and psychological health and integrity of girl children and female young adults. This is most evident in the practices such as child marriage and female genital cutting. Child marriage is common in cultures where female children are undervalued. They are regarded as an additional expense to the family in cultures where dowry is to be paid. The smaller dowries of younger girls are one incentive for marrying them off early. Another factor is the common belief that an early marriage ensures a longer period of fertility. Parents also tend to think that giving away their girl children to be married will ensure that they do not get pregnant outside of marriage and bring shame on themselves and their family (Chifeche, 2018:98).

Physiologically, girls are exposed to older women placing their fingers into the vagina to ensure that the hymen has not been broken. This practice signifies that the girl is pure and that her body is sacred. Some have compared this to what gynaecologists do when medically examining their patients. Girls wear a skin skirt that is loose. The opposite is also true here, if girls choose not to submit themselves to such practices, they are deemed immoral, disrespectful and arrogant. "It is generally argued that most uncircumcised girls become prostitutes because they are sexually active and have a desire to engage in extramarital sex than the circumcised ones" (Maiko, 2007:70). Intellectually, these girls receive training on how to be a woman and what to expect as one grows up. This knowledge is imparted on them by the older women who serve as mentors (sponsors) and who have been chosen by their parents. Part of this instruction is also how these young girls can protect their virginity. The girls usually stay with these women for a period of time and also use this time to prepare psychologically for the ritual. To some, the practice of virginity testing is one that should be based on self-control and not preparation for marriage exclusively.

The practice of female genital cutting is a rite of passage that also takes place in Mozambican societies. This practice puts young women at risk of infection and infertility, as well as severe blood loss, shock, and it can sometimes cause death. Female genital cutting is intended to reduce female sexual desire to prevent young women from wanting to engage in sexual activity. Having no sexual pleasure would mean that they will not stray outside of marriage where sex is a necessity rather than a pleasure for women. Young women and their families fear social rejection if they refuse to participate in this cultural practice (Chifeche, 2018:98).

(b) Boys

Physiologically, the boy's foreskin is cut. This prepares the boy for his adult status within the clan. It gives him the authority to make decisions on behalf of the community which then gives him a voice. It also means that he lays claim to all property

within his tribe including the women. Boys are also immersed in animal blood or cold rivers and given bitter foods prior to being circumcised to prove that they would be able to endure the ritual. They are not allowed to cry throughout this process. They are dressed in short skin cloths with their heads shaved. Unfortunately, the opposite is true for the boy who is not circumcised. He becomes an outcast and is deemed useless in the community, including in his family (Maiko, 2007:70). Most boys go through the process because they want to be acknowledged as an adult, not only because they want recognition for being strong. Boys are not given the option of staying with a specific group of males, but are open to instruction and discipline from any male who has been circumcised within their tribe. A group of men, however, are chosen to accompany the young man to the bush for the actual ritual for a period of seclusion. Religiously, the boys are formally introduced to certain powers to protect, bless, and guide them. Rituals and ceremonies such as sacrifices, libations, and prayers are offered to the gods seeking their help to protect these “born again” men for the sake of the growth and development of society. Politically, the boy is admitted into the membership of the tribe; socially, he is permanently attached to his age set; and religiously, he is regenerated and affiliated with tribal ancestors (Motty, 2013:162-163).

Even the songs sung during this time are aimed at educating these youth on the ways of the tribe. Drums form an integral part of this. The key role players during the initiation process are the mentor/sponsor, the circumciser, and the initiate. The mentor is responsible for the training and protection of the initiate during the process (including that the circumcision or testing is medically safe). As noted earlier, the family decides who the circumciser will be and pays for them with animals (cows or goats) or money. Traditional medicines, ash and knives, and special trees or stones are usually used.

Traditional practices are meant to give young people access to the cultural heritage of their ethnic group and offer them citizenship. They also serve to build identity and integrate young people into the community. Young people have to define their social and cultural identity and become economically independent. Youth search for their place in society and need acceptance from the community. However, because of a lack of possibilities to sustain themselves, they often remain dependent while, at the same time, have to shoulder heavy adult care giving responsibilities. Those who grow up in traditional communities experience life as remaining fairly similar from one generation to the next, structured by the cycles of human life. Gender identities and gender relations are critical aspects of culture because they shape the way in which daily life is lived in the family, but also in the wider community and the workplace. Expectations about attributes and behaviours appropriate to women or men, and about the relationships between women and men are shaped by culture (Chifeche, 2018:102-105).

Circumcision is understood as preparing young people for marriage; boys to take up the headship of their families and girls having to experience the pain of childbearing. These practices have been criticised by gender activists because they have been deemed as patriarchal in origin. Young people are raised within contexts in which girls know they are inferior to boys and that they have less value than them. Girls are encouraged to remain virgins whilst boys are encouraged to engage in sexual intercourse. The ritual practice of 'lobola' before marriage is also impacted by whether a young girl has been through virginity testing or not. Matsinhe (2015:71-74) argues that in distancing themselves from their fathers' traditional attitudes and practices, these young men were also distancing themselves from tradition, resulting in these postcolonial young men avoiding responsibility until they are cornered. Due to the harsh economic conditions, not only do young men actively avoid fatherhood and family for as long as possible, but they also limit the number of children they have once they become married. Globalised individualisation and stubborn demands of tradition have pulled Mozambican youth in opposite directions (*ibid.*). Some Christian communities have likened it to that of confirmation practices of the faith community in which youth dedicate themselves to God and to the particular faith community (Young in Maiko, 2007). This Christian practice has also been exclusive about infant baptism and marriage in certain faith communities. As noted earlier, the converse is also true. Some Christian communities consider it evil, secular, and even heretic to one's Christian faith. Maiko (*ibid.*, 75-79) argues that the notion of female circumcision is not biblically warranted. He bases his argument on biblical passages such as Genesis 17:11; Deuteronomy 10:16; Luke 1:59; Acts 7:8 and others. He adds that if the songs sung and the sacrifices made are occultic and go against what Scripture teaches, Christian youth should not be subdued to this practice. He further adds that these practices should be in honour of God and not ancestors. Maiko notes that this is why some modern Christian families have resorted to their sons being circumcised in hospitals, but he also disagrees with this because this is most often not accomplished without the mentorship and induction into the cultural values of a specific tribe.

3. Implications for youth ministry research and practice

Theological reflection on matters relating to how we do youth ministry is aimed at developing ministerial instruments and teaching youth leaders how to use these (Van der Ven, 1993:35). These instruments are not only skills but include knowledge, understanding, and attitudes. This means that all functions of the church (teaching, liturgy, community, diaconal work) should take this interaction seriously as it pertains to the youth. This paper aimed to highlight moments such as (cultural) contexts, situations, and practices that are relevant to Christian youth and youth ministry, and how they pertain to the faith formation of the youth.

Sociologist, Anthony Giddens (2001:533) agrees with Maiko that the *religious life of the young person is also a central aspect of social life*. The symbols and rituals used are most often associated with something they connect to on a social level. He (*ibid.*, 546) argues that church attendance is not the only variable to consider in the faith formation of these youth because the regularity of such attendance is not necessarily evidence of a deeply rooted faith. These youth may attend out of habit. To make recommendations concerning youth ministry practice, it is important to acknowledge that there are various types of youth ministry depending on the contextual focus thereof active in South Africa (e.g. Programme-orientated youth ministry or Christ-orientated youth ministry, etc.). Youth ministry practices include programmes and activities within congregational contexts as well as biblical teaching and discipleship, how young people are spiritually formed through these practices (Christian education, etc.), and the various relationships the youth find themselves part of (family, peers, etc.). *Youth ministry should also be widely understood as being concerned with holistic (physical, spiritual, intellectual, and sexual) ways in which young people are ministered to*. This is all, however, largely dependent on the faith formation of youth. The success of the latter is closely related to these youth taking responsibility for and being personally involved in their own faith formation (Weber, 2014:31). This holistic form of ministry *needs to take the cultural dynamics of each congregational context* into consideration before it can consider how its youth faith formation process takes the role of African cultural practices seriously.

There is increasing pressure on the church, its leadership, and academic institutions to develop strategies for youth ministry that would meet the depth of the challenges the contemporary youth are facing. The youth themselves have not been part of the development of such strategies, partly because *youth ministry in South Africa has not focussed on helping youth think theologically*. The youth have mostly been seen as consumers of theology rather than conversation partners in religious discourse. In other words, the youth have been the subjects of ministry and not partners in theological discussions or their implementation in congregations. One result of this approach to youth ministry has been that the youth remained dependent on others for their faith formation and have not taken responsibility for their faith themselves (Dean, Clark & Rahn, 2001:30-31).

An important part of faith formation is *helping young people discern expectations in the midst of the tensions between cultural expectations and teachings, and the faith community*. In my brief conversations with youth from varying African cultures, I noticed that some of these youth are eager to engage with the initiation rites of their cultures, despite being urbanised through education and living in the city. However, others feel compelled in obligation to parents and tra-

ditional leaders such as ancestors. These youth report how they try to remain loyal to participating in the rituals, practices, and beliefs of the faith community, but find themselves living out what culture and family teaches them. This is further explored in the empirical study aimed at hearing from more youth in this regard.

Cross-cultural studies teach that acculturation to different contexts is important in the process of youth identity and faith formation. Acculturation teaches youth how to learn new stories, values, practices, and rituals that agree with their faith as a lifestyle (Yust, 2004:28-29). Like faith formation, learning to adopt a new culture as a way of life is a life-long process. During this process, youth could decide to abandon their familial traditions and take on the ecclesial ones (assimilation); or they could juggle the two by living according to each when they are in them (separation); or they could decide that neither is relevant to their new lives by marginalising both; or they could choose to integrate those elements which they believe are relevant to a Christ-like lifestyle with each other (*ibid.*, 30). The problem with acculturation of faith is that it requires that youth pass over from one culture to another without truly identifying which aspects of their own culture they abandon in the process (Kiaziku, 2009:48). Kiaziku argues that the gospel should be shared within cultural contexts and not as a separate culture. Integration, over time, should be encouraged as these youth grow in their faith. African scholars (Healey & Sybertz, 1996; Bujo & Muyo, 2008; Mthlabi, 2008; Kiaziku, 2009) stress the importance of the process of inculturation for the gospel message to be internalised amidst prevailing cultures. Youth in an African context require communities in which the gospel is internalised and practised. Inculturation seeks to integrate Christian faith with cultural life and world-views (Bujo & Muyo, 2008:191). Inculturation calls for discerning which cultural values disagree with a biblical Christian faith and which Christian practices align with cultural ones (Kiaziku, 2009:19). This then means that Christian traditions should also be aligned with the biblical text and the essence of the gospel. These traditions should not be accepted only because they were passed down through church fathers, but because they find relevance to the prevailing culture (*ibid.*). Many young people experience tension between the faith being taught at missionary established churches and the cultural expectations of their families. They need the example of Christ-like adults in their lives. This resonates with the notion of mentors within the initiation process and also within an intergenerational youth ministry context. If this is not evident in their lives, the option to abandon faith through separation becomes more attractive (Yust, 2004:39-40). Inculturation takes both the gospel message and the cultural contexts seriously. Faith formation processes that take inculturation seriously reflect on faith, church structures and leadership, liturgy, role of ancestors and communities, and morals within the prevailing African culture of the youth in preparation for their faith formation process (Kiaziku, 2009:84). Maiko (2006:78) adds that "(c)ontextualiza-

tion is the key to better live our culture remembering that the Bible is universal and interpretive in nature...every culture (should) understand Scripture from its own point of view but also remembering the universal scriptural standard as they are declared in the Holy Word of God.”

One of the varying challenges to youth ministry in postmodern urban contexts is de-traditionalisation (Schweitzer, et al., in Osmer & Creasy Dean, 2006:21). This practice is evident in how *faith communities and even parents neglect passing on the Christian faith to its youth*. Many youth leaders (Weber, 2014) report that they too have been moulded in specific faith traditions and theologies, which makes it difficult to teach youth new ways of living out their faith. This problem sadly began in the early childhood years of church ministry with children. Missionaries to Africa taught that the Christian faith could not be lived alongside one's culture, resulting in many Africans having to choose between faith and culture as part of their upbringing (Lartey in Osmer & Creasy Dean, 2006:70). Postmodern youth want what is current and relevant and church leaders heed to these calls at the expense of passing on faith and cultural traditions necessary for a growing faith. This is most likely the reason why many youth do not see the value of being part of a consistent faith community (Schweitzer, et al., Osmer & Creasy Dean, 2006:35). Youth ministry scholars believe that the faith community can still play a significant role in serving and ministering alongside these youth. “When adolescents who have reached Fowler's synthetic-conventional stage of faith are confronted with the culture of religious individualization and diversity, they may well adopt the language of individualization but still combine it with a type of thinking or meaning-making which is conventional and community-orientated rather than reflective and individualistic” (ibid., 36). The African worldview of Ubuntu is useful to consider in this regard as it calls for a lifestyle of accountability to and within the relationships one has (Grobelaar, 2012:43). To the young person, this would include accountability to one's family members, peers, leaders, neighbours, church, and so forth. The faith communities young people find themselves in can learn from this African worldview because these faith communities also find resonance in the metaphor of church as family (which was alluded to earlier).² Faith formation is the transformative process of putting on the Lord Jesus Christ and putting off the desires of the self in accordance with Scripture³ (Willard in Wilhoit, 2008:9). Wilhoit (2008:14)

² Motty (2013:9) defines an indigenous church as “a group of believers who live out their [Christian] life, including their socialized Christian activity, in the patterns of the local society, and for whom any transformation of that society comes out of their felt needs under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures.” This church has the ability to make the Christian gospel relevant and meaningful to one's situation; it is relating the gospel to a culture in the daily life of the Christian members.

³ Romans 13:14

states that all people can be negatively or positively formed spiritually. This formation impacts the person's character, wisdom, and faith greater than developmental theories would. It is an intentional and communal process of Christians growing in relationship with God. It requires that one get involved in this relationship with God and the faith community. Maturity is aimed at becoming Christ-like through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. (Wilhoit, 2008:23). As such, *faith formation is a life-long process requiring multiple ministry approaches and not just one specific programme*. Wilhoit (ibid., 26-27) places emphasis on Christians being the ones who grow. He believes that many become Christian as a once-off occurrence. He further adds that many Christians fail in keeping the gospel central to ministry rather viewing it as an entry point into ministry. The gospel is not only meant for proclamation, but for growing in the faith as well. This gospel is what motivates the Christian to pursue a life of daily growth in Christ.⁴ Khumalo (2015:38) adds a further complexity of an urbanised youth, namely being referred to as an Afropolitan.⁵ In this sense, this youth must form an identity along at least three dimensions: national, racial, and cultural – with subtle tensions in between. While our parents can claim one country as home, we must define our relationship to the places we live and choose bits of a national identity. The task of faith formation is to preach and teach young people this gospel so that they are able to understand it better and gain greater confidence in it, and it has to confront false gods and idols present in these young people's lives. This confrontation enables youth to see the behaviours and attitudes that do not align with the gospel in order to change these. This process takes time and willingness to allow the gospel to daily intercept their lives (Wilhoit, 2008:31-32). When too much emphasis is placed on the gospel as a single decision for Christ, the youth and church do not see a need for any further faith formation to take place. Faith formation must address the external and internal challenges youth face, and this can only be done through formation that is entrenched in the gospel (Setran & Kiesling, 2013:26-27).

4. Conclusion

The faith formation of young people cannot be isolated from the identity and moral formation of these youth. The faith of these youth is intertwined with their identity as young people, how they make choices and behave (morality), and also how they are developing physically and cognitively. Strommen and Hardel (2000:257) discuss how the family and church should impact their communities and culture.

⁴ Wilhoit (2008:31) describes salvation as the complete process of turning to Christ (through redemption) through being sanctified and glorified in Him. Using Acts 1:16 as motivation, he adds that spiritual formation involves guarding this gospel from idols and false gods in our culture.

⁵ "Afropolitans are those people of African parentage who are born overseas" (Khumalo, 2015).

Traditional African cultures set a good example of the Deuteronomy 6 principle in which adolescence is understood as a time in which adults pass on practical knowledge about culture and life skills. The place of circumcision and virginity testing within these cultures need to be confronted in light of a holistic faith formation process that enables a Christ-like and gospel-centred identity, morality, and faith. For this reason, faith communities are called on to explore what these practices mean for these youth in their cultural contexts, but also in the process toward an owned faith as adults. I am of the opinion that the youth's communities and cultures have a louder voice in these young people's lives, than their families and churches.

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