

# The decolonising of theology through African proverbs



**Author:**  
Kelebogile T. Resane<sup>1</sup> 

**Affiliation:**  
<sup>1</sup>Department of Historical and Constructive Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**  
Kelebogile Resane,  
resanekt@ufs.ac.za

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The decolonisation of theology has been a subject in academia for almost 60 years. In this article, although referring to African proverbs as a way of decolonising theology all the proverbs are in the Setswana language, which the author is knowledgeable of and is conversant with; however, most of these proverbs cut across tribal, ethnic, and geographical boundaries. The objectives are, among others, to demonstrate the richness of African philosophy and wisdom expressed through proverbs, idioms, and folklore. These proverbs are sapient and capable of articulating theology, therefore making theology contextual and relevant for Africans. Definitions of proverbs start the discussions. A literature review and common knowledge are used to validate the facts stated. Three areas are chosen where and how the proverbs can be used to formulate and validate theological truth. Firstly, the area of ethics where proverbs are used in ethical instructions regarding morality and values, community and cooperation, leadership, family life, as well as respect and integrity. The second area is theologising through proverbs by which dogmatisation can be achieved highlighting the view of theology, a database in theologising, an authority base, and hermeneutical principle. Thirdly, proverbs can be used to strengthen communion ecclesiology. The conclusion is drawn that theology can unshackle itself from the clutches of colonialism, if African philosophy and wisdom expressed through proverbs can be engaged in hermeneutical processes and the contextualisation of theology in the African context.

**Contribution:** The article engages the Setswana language, African philosophy, and theology to strengthen the theme of decolonising theology. It is both interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary as it engages anthropology, linguistics, human philosophy, theological ethics, dogmatics, and ecclesiology.

**Keywords:** proverbs; African; theology; culture; philosophy; wisdom; ethics.

## Introduction

There are loud voices in the public domain speaking of the African revolution. These voices are not only the cries for African cultural inventions but also for theological reflections. This African revolution 'is the desire to make our cultural infiltration into the so-called organised religions within the continent a reality' (Mawusi 2015:10). Theology in Africa has come to a place of appreciation of African cultures and traditions. There are plenty of endeavours to engage concepts such as *ubuntu* (humanness), *ujamaa*, *baraza*, *palaver*, to express biblical theological concepts of the sanctity of life, ecumenism, communion ecclesiology et cetera. In contrast to Western missionaries' endeavours of annulling and rescinding African cultural sanities, to embrace their Christianity, African theologians like me, 'are now awakening to the fact that our cultures have a part to play in Christianity' (Mawusi 2015:11). Although the continent is far ahead in theologising through African wisdom and philosophy, South Africa lags behind as it is still entrapped by the European Calvinistic legacy. The time is now for South African theologians of varied convictions to engage African proverbs, myths, folklore, et cetera to decolonise theology. We need to identify the universal values in African proverbs and reinterpret them as tools for situating theology into the African context. Self-respecting theological institutions are now adding to their curriculum the subject known as Religions Studies. As Bediako (2004:69) alludes, the phenomenology and the theology of religions are now an inevitability. Proverbs are starting to appear in theological studies, and rightly so. Muzorewa (1985:80) notes that proverbs and oral traditions are 'now beginning to be written down, contain and convey African wisdom and theology'.

## Definitions

Proverbs are short, witty, popular expressions that contain morals, truth, socio-cultural precepts, and the heritage of a particular group of people. They often address the heart of a

discourse in any given context truthfully and objectively, as demonstrated by different authors below.

Reflecting on the definition of proverbs, scholars in the African continent proposed some elaborations. For instance Musoke (2018:56) says: 'Proverbs are traditional wise sayings whose authors are not known; they give advice on how to live'. African proverbs provide wisdom, instruction, inspiration, and correction in every sphere of life. These proverbs, according to Katangole (1997:27–38), were used to transmit morals since they can be easily learned; their formulations are intentionally brief and sometimes even poetic and interesting. African conversations are aesthetically proverbial. Kanyoro (1989) enlightens us that:

[P]roverbs are sayings that are pregnant with meaning. The context of a proverb determines its meaning. Proverbs are like shadows. You have to move with them, and they have to move with you (p. 63).

In the African worldview, there are no sacred and secular proverbs. Proverbs are both philosophical and religious. They are the real life, which is whole and cannot be dichotomised between natural and sacred. Mickelsen (1977:334) agrees with this by defining proverbs as 'short, sagacious sayings taken from everyday life'. Healey (1988) in The Sukuma Research Committee, defines a proverb to be the following:

[A] short, pithy saying that encodes the philosophical outlook, religious concepts, and worldview of African society in a describable form. Some of these proverbs involve God and wisdom. Others are concerned with many other aspects of man's existence (p. 35).

Proverbs are confirmatory and conscientious statements, transmitted by tradition. Their authors are unknown as these proverbs are found in primitive, preliterate, and antique cultures. They are used to communicate dogmatic wisdom and philosophy.

Proverbs often address themes of a discourse objectively, truthfully, and faithfully within a given context in any given context. They are characterised by terseness and charm, featuring the economic use of words, sharpness of focus and a touch of aesthetic language. Proverbs reflect the community's culture that projects beliefs, morals, attitudes, and inner life. Themes covered in proverbial expression are a spiritual view of life, including belief in *Modimo*, the Creator; respect for the dignity of another person; the sense of family, including the relationship with the ancestors, a sense of community life, in which the individual is introduced through initiation rights (Nyamiti in Wabanhu & Moerschbacher 2017:36). They provide education and rules of conduct in human life.

African conversational interactions are full of utterings of proverbs depending on the occasion and discussion that calls for it (Akoto-Abutiati 2014:74). The type or the purpose of the gathering does not matter. Even during the African

*palaver*, which is the gathering of wise men for crucial decisions on behalf of the community, proverbs are uttered to drive points home (Bujo 2010:36). These conversations are sweetened by entertainment and humour, found in these proverbs. The thoughts expressed through proverbs are inspirational, and in many cases, call for action. Wisdom is highly associated with a person who conversationally articulates proverbs.

## Theological ethics through proverbs

Proverbs are carriers of culture, building blocks for wise living and good moral life. They keep people grounded and provide insights into a wise lifestyle and contribute towards making good decisions, thereby satisfying the concept of moralities in African realities. The morality that is transmitted through proverbs 'has a primary sapiential character' (Bujo 2016:25).

Proverbs are instructional on what is right and wrong. They are a major source of moral formation and ethical behaviour. Akoto-Abutiati (2014:74) says proverbs involve 'character formation, transformation, and/or reformation'. The thrust of the central theme of all proverbial lore is to live wisely and harmoniously within the community with fellow citizens, nature, and God the Creator. In the inner circle such as in one-to-one or communal interactions, proverbs are engaged to admonish, encourage, warn, rebuke or praise members of a community. They are utilised to move life towards positive values. Proverbs use figures in nature, such as animals, vegetation, including people or characters. In other words, they use the familiar to explain the unfamiliar, teaching from the known to the unknown.

## Examples of how proverbs contribute towards theological ethics

Proverbs contribute towards the decolonisation of theological ethics for various reasons. Firstly, there are those that teach morality and values. These form an integral part of ethics. In the genre concerned, proverbs speak of one's relationship with the self and others. For instance, the proverb, *khumo le lehuma di lala mmogo* [wealth and poverty are bedfellows] teaches that a wealthy person should not undermine the poor person, as both are humans. The proverb is enhanced by another one that says *khumo segwagwa e a pharuma* [wealth leaps like a frog]. Being rich can be temporary. These proverbs teach the value of wealth management, and the morality of respecting people, regardless of their economic status. But the proverb also has a tone that wealth is no guarantee that poverty may not overtake the wealthy person. In other words, 'you are rich today, you may be poor tomorrow', or vice versa. It goes with the proverb that says *O se tshenge yo o weleng, mareledi a sa le pele* [Don't laugh at the fallen person, the road ahead is still slippery]. Do not laugh at those in trouble, as no one knows what the future holds. The proverb clearly teaches that we should

demonstrate solidarity with the unfortunate, as we may be in their situation in future. The old adage is: 'It is him today, tomorrow it may be me'. The value here is clear, namely that caring for the fallen is a virtue, and that the helper in turn may soon need help himself. It is clearly a biblical dictum: *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn* (Rm 13:15 NIV).

Secondly, there are proverbs that teach the importance of community and cooperation, which is expressed by the African philosophy known as *botho* or *ubuntu*. These proverbs express the ethics of humanness, togetherness, and harmonious coexistence. Good examples include *mabogo dinku a a thebana* [Hands are like sheep, they help each other]. It carries the connotation that people help one another under all circumstances. The emphasis is here on cooperation, partnership, and solidarity with each other. It further reflects the importance of one's belonging in the community, that no one is an island. Apart from the reference to *letsema* [communal cooperation], the proverb reinforces *homothumadon*, which is the biblical 'one another' principle. *Let us, therefore, make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification* (Rm 14:17 NIV). Another proverb in this regard of communion, is *ngwana kgetsi ya tsie o a tshwaraganelwa* [A child is a heavy load, therefore needs more people to carry]. The direct translation of this proverb is the familiar, 'It takes a village to raise a child'. One sees the communal responsibility of raising a child, which is the reason for the lack of space for orphans in the African cultural value system. The ethics of communality is very clear here, namely that a person needs people to live and advance in all spheres of life. The theological dogma of communion ecclesiology is undoubtedly expressed in these proverbs, to express this cultural value system.

Thirdly, there are proverbs that address leadership – either positively or negatively. Odaga (1984:68) enlightens us that 'there are proverbs on political, social, educational, religious and economic issues'. For instance, on the political or leadership front, *before la kgosi le agelwa mosako* [The word of the chief is final and must be respected]. This is a call that instructions from a figure of authority are to be respected and accepted. One sees here the importance of obedient subordination. The subordinates should implement and undertake the leader's instructions. Another proverb is *Kgosi thothobolo e olela matlakala* [A king carries all burdens of his nation]. It clearly demonstrates that leadership is expected to take responsibility for whatever followers do. National life, whether political, economic, or otherwise, all cumulates in leadership. If subjects misbehave, the leader pays the price. There is a cost too and in leadership. Everything stands and falls with leadership.

Fourthly, some proverbs address family life, which is one area where ethics are to be demonstrated and lived. Proverbs like *Gaabo motho go thebe phatswa* [One's home is always one's cherishment]. This is clearly known as *charity begins at home*. The home is biblically a haven where one runs to when the

storms of life assail the individual. It is a place that offers some sense of love, security, and assurance of support. The family is the place of sharing equally what is available for survival. This is expressed by *bana ba motho ba kgaogana tlhogwana ya tsie* ('siblings share a small head of a locust'). No matter how little food is available in the household, each family member must have a share. This is the teaching of equal sharing, or equal distribution of what is available. Hospitality in the family is a non-negotiable ethical value.

Fifthly, there are proverbs regarding self-respect and integrity. A member of the community is morally shaped by the community, but he or she must also take a responsibility to shape, capacitate, and hone him- or herself. There is a powerful proverb that says, *more mogolo go betlwa wa taola, wa motho o a ipetla*, which is very difficult to transliterate, but it means a person is responsible to shape his or her life. A person chooses his or her own path in life. This proverb is powerful advice for the ethics of self-responsibility. It reveals how individuals must make a choice for what they want to become. It calls for one to make a self-informed decision about one's life. Ethics of responsibility taken during decision-making processes, is called into action here. *So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God* (Rm 14:12 NIV). The other proverb in a similar genre is *tshwenyana e bowa bo ntlha e a ikilela*. Also, difficult to transliterate as it speaks of the baby baboon with sensitive fur that should avoid places of danger. It is a call to sensitivity to places or circumstances of danger. If one is prone to accidents, vulnerable to dangers, or even weak in certain areas, one should avoid the possibility of becoming a victim. Again, personal responsibility comes into play here. One must be in charge of one's life, avoiding the weak spots or circumstances that may lead to temptations.

There are many areas where proverbs speak ethically, such as hospitality, patriotism, et cetera, but I chose only five to drive the point home that, indeed, proverbs can be used to decolonise theology. And out of this critical understanding and application of these in theologising processes, one concludes that 'Christian ethics and morality are the end result of theology' (Kunhiyop 2012:5). The bottom line here is, when African values are engaged in theologising, we arrive at Nkansah-Obrempong's (2013) assertion:

[W]hat must motivate and shape our moral behaviour, actions, and engagement in the areas of politics and governance is our unique relationship with God. The Triune God being the model and source of our moral life, and we being his subjects or children of God, by creation and redemption respectively, are to reflect and imitate the behaviour and character of God (p. 137–138).

## Theology through proverbs

Theology for Africa should be relevant, contextual, and culturally sensible. One of the best ways to decolonise theology, is to appeal to African culture and engage African proverbs in making theology attractive to Africans. The reality on our lap is, that 'the best form of theologising might be collecting, creating and reflecting on proverbs' (Bevans 1992:12).

## Theologising and dogmatising through proverbs

Theologising through proverbs should never consider or apply any dichotomy in or through proverbial expressions. Proverbs possess some eclectic potencies that cover nature and humanity adequately. It is for this reason that Mickelsen (1977) once again highlights:

[P]roverbs concern man in his relationship to God, to other men, to self, to things or possessions, and to the specific qualities of moral excellence. One might speak of (1) personal proverbs, (2) interpersonal proverbs, (3) proverbs referring to God, (4) proverbs referring to possessions, and (5) proverbs referring to moral principles (p. 334).

What is crucial in theology for Africa, is to reverse the notion that the gospel entered a continent that was irreligious, dark, or void of spirituality. This notion is explained by Kiaziku (2009), that missionaries thought they were entering a continent where they were going:

[T]o begin their activities on a *tabula rasa in qua nihil erat scriptum*, a blank sheet, if not downright paganism, where there was nothing that could be called a religious function of the soul (p. 11).

No such assumption that Africa was a godless or cultureless continent is true. Mbiti (1969:1–3) makes it clear that Africans were renowned for being religious, and that religion permeates all spheres of African life. Africans cannot coexist without a religion. The imposition of Western imperial practices as genuine Christianity, must now come under scrutiny. The approach should be followed wisely with openness to listen to cultural expressions as accentuated through proverbs, idioms, and folklore. Dogmatic formulations are enriched when cited from the cultural epistemologies, in synchrony with the biblical metanarratives. This process continues to be known as contextualisation, which was a buzzword in African theology since the latter part of the twentieth century. Nürnberger (2007) correctly captures that:

[W]herever the gospel enters into a new religious and cultural situation, it becomes 'incarnate' in that situation. It does not fill a vacuum, but enters into an existing structure of assumptions, values and norms and transforms it from within (p. 97).

Even when engaging African proverbs to validate, quantify, formulate, or confirm Christian dogmas, a theologian should theologise contextually, bearing in mind 'the view of theology, the database for theologising, the authority base in theologising, and the hermeneutical principles employed' (Cole in Ngewa, Shaw & Tienou 1998:17).

### The view of theology

I am of the strong opinion that the dogmatisation process should go beyond ecclesiastical boundaries and engage cultural proverbs in 'collecting, interpreting and arranging materials pertaining to God's self-revelation and living in obedience to that which God has revealed' (Deissman 1903:143).

The eclectic approach to doing theology is the way to go, as interdisciplinary theologising is inevitable. Kunhiyop (2012:4) is correct that 'theologians use tools and terms provided by philosophy when seeking to clearly explain how different parts of the teaching in the Bible fit together'. I have no doubt that this includes African philosophy which is epistemologically expressed through African proverbs. In agreement with Mbiti, Healey and Sybertz (2012:29) say that these proverbs 'contain and point to a deep spirituality, as well as theological and philosophical insights'. Some proverbs in Setswana carry the message about *Modimo* (God). *Modimo*, the Creator's name, permeates their proverbs, idioms, fairy tales and folklore. Nkomazana (2007) captures the religious concept of the Batswana:

[T]he Batswana tell many myths, proverbs, and stories about *Modimo* being a good and great Creator of all things. He is said to have created animals (especially cattle), land, vegetation and plants and gave these to their forefathers for livelihood. He was believed to have also given their forefathers the wisdom to run their day-to-day activities (p. 24).

For instance, *Modimo ga o je nkabo* [With God, there is no what if ...]. God is not the respecter of any person. *I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right* (Acts 10:34–35, cf Rm 2:11). Nobody can boast about his favour or blessings, as these spoils can be withdrawn and be given to others who were undermined before. The proverb teaches God's principle of humility. It is also a proverb that encourages resilience in the face of adversity. The bad luck of today may be the good luck tomorrow. There is some positive attitude towards life encouraged here. God's sovereignty is acknowledged and all life is accepted as inevitable.

Another proverb about God says, *Mokuwa-Modimo wa ikuela* ('Calling upon God is for personal benefit'). This is a lesson on prayer. If one calls upon God, it is for personal exhortation and inspiration. It agrees well with the apostolic *didachē* that *prayers and intercessions should be made for everyone, so that we may live a peaceful and quiet life in all godliness* (1 Tm 2:1–2). The proverb shows that God is closer to those who call upon his name and that there are some benefits to calling upon his name.

Looking at these proverbs, one can agree with Lugira (1979:57), that 'A proverb on God is seriously a talk, a reflection on God, the unravelling of which may result in books. It is African theology'. So, there is theology in the African proverbs. These can be used to enhance understanding of God in a most significant way.

### Database for theologising

Systematic theologians are of the unwavering conviction that the primary source for theologising is the Bible, since 'the Christian faith depends on the biblical witness' (Nürnberger 2004:12) Without losing the Protestant conviction of *sola scriptura*, I strongly believe that arriving at dogmatic

formulations and adoptions, the relative source is contemporary social and cultural settings, as expressed proverbially in African linguistic domains. Theological dictums based solely on the primary sources still make Christianity a foreign faith. Those from the evangelical persuasion, fall victim to going into this proclivity, by citing the primary source as 'the' only source, consequently divorcing the Bible from the African context. Decolonising theology through proverbs means interpreting and expressing the Christian faith through proverbs; 'allowing the absolute Word of God to speak to our contemporary social, cultural, economic, and political situations' (Cole in Ngewa, Shaw & Tienou 1998:17). In other words, the message (content) is to be expressed contextually (through proverbs) to make it relevant to the hearers. African proverbs are rich linguistically, to make the message aesthetically relevant. Following the broader database eliminates accusations levelled against theologians in Africa, that our theologising endeavours do answer questions that nobody ever asked. This calls for theologians to come to terms with the fact that theology is both a scholarly discipline and a deeply spiritual endeavour. 'As a scholarly discipline, it pursues its task with the best academic tools to achieve its goals. As a spiritual endeavour, it involves personal commitment, devotion and character formation' (Kunhiyop 2012:11). Theology, though a social science, aims to be a discipline without walls. It interfaces with a range of current issues, therefore inviting non-theological disciplines with openness and receptivity, poising it to become the queen of the sciences (O'Murchu 2021:7), hence the need for an interdisciplinary approach to this research. *Sedikwa ke ntša pedi ga se thata* is a proverb that is popularly known as 'Two hunting dogs are likely to catch prey'. There is a need for more manpower to finish the task. A job done by many is easily accomplished. Employing many disciplines in theologising, adds value and makes theology comprehensible in the African context.

### Authority based in theologising

Decolonisation of theology, like the same attempts in all disciplines, calls for an authoritative base. Dogmatic formulations need a Supreme Court of Appeal in matters of faith and conduct. In theologising this final Court of Appeal, is the absolute Word of God inscribed. Subjectivism should never be allowed to be the final authority in and through theologising endeavours. Proverbs are human philosophy and is therefore applicable, even though their apex is found in biblical truth. There should be some careful distinction between data and authority. The biblical revelation should not be subjected to humanistic preferences but rather be used to express or validate it. This takes me to the next and final consideration of applying proverbs in dogmatising endeavours. And that is to use hermeneutics through proverbs.

### Hermeneutical principles in theologising

What is important in using hermeneutics through proverbs, is to guard against the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. The historicity of the text is important in

contextualisation. This is captured by Cole (in Ngewa, Shaw & Tienou 1998:21) that '[a]n understanding of the context of writing enhances our own understanding of the message of the Bible'. It can easily lead to the proverbs being used to express hermeneutical conclusions. This is demonstrated by Nsapo's (in Bujo 2013:129) analysis of the Congolese theologian, Francois Kabasele-Lumbala, that he never stops repeating that 'the future of Africans depends on their re-discovery of their identity and culture'. This affirms my hypothesis here that the decolonising of theology can be done through African proverbs, by making these proverbs the grid and the vital space in and through which the person and the works of Christ are expressed. This fact is confirmed by Healey and Sybertz (2012):

[T]he proverb and its parallel biblical text together help to teach the meaning of the Christian faith and specific Christian truths, beliefs and values. This means moving the particular African proverb from its human value meaning to its applied Christian meaning. In this process, African culture, Scripture, and the Christian tradition jointly emphasize the importance of communicating and teaching basic values (p. 46).

When proverbs are applied to hermeneutical processes, a rethinking of theological emphases becomes alive, and new categories are employed. In the process, the text becomes alive as hermeneutical discovery ignites relevance and new understanding that comes along. At the end of the hermeneutical processes in which African proverbs, idioms, and folklore are engaged as means of God's revelation, the Christian faith fulfils African culture, and Christ's salvific acts become real. According to Modise in Chimhanda, Molobi & Mothoagae (2015), decolonising of theology processes is when:

[T]he biblical text becomes a catalyst in the exploration of pressing contemporary issues relevant to the community; it offers a language so that the voice of the voiceless may be heard (p. 4).

### Communion ecclesiology through proverbs

Africans cherish communality, interdependency, and sociability. 'Nothing is actually regarded as belonging to or owned by an individual' (Akoto-Abutiati 2014:73). African religious worldviews, philosophy, including spirituality, all emanate from the emphasis on community and relationships. Like Orobator (2008:147) asserts: 'African spirituality is a community-based spirituality'. Most, if not all African values, find expression through proverbs. These values are not oppositional to or critical of the Christian faith, because, as stated by Nkansah-Obrempong (2013) they are:

[A]ffirmed by biblical values and teachings. For example, in the African context, I am thinking of communal values – 'sharing, mutual aid, caring for others, interdependence, solidarity, reciprocal obligation and social harmony' (p. 133).

Africans are communal people, and in their communality, instructions for wisdom and qualitative life are orally passed. This means communality is the platform from which life is

shaped through proverbial and idiomatic expressions. Communitarity is not just a gathering for fun, it is an opportunity for members to learn to be equipped for life. As humans share the essence of humanity, there is a commonality where the experienced unity becomes real. 'Full humanity is not just expressed in the relationship to God, but also in other relationships' (Williams 2013:132). In theology, this is the redeemed community. The theological concept of 'a redeemed community is developed in the New Testament' (Kunhiyop 2012:10). This synchronises with the apostolic church in Acts 2:42–47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

This is an ecclesial community that cherished togetherness (communion ecclesiology) as they were bonded together by faith and with the chords of love for one another that could not be broken. Their devotion to the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of the bread, prayer, and sharing was the strength of their communality. African communality in the context of moral formation is just like the redeemed community in the context of theology. Like in African communality, the Acts ecclesial community shows that 'the realisation of sociability or relationships in daily living by the individual and the community, is the central moral and ethical imperative' (Magesa 2014:65). The characteristics of this biblical communion reflect the Swahili *baraza*, 'which is the African experience of conversation in public meetings to discuss important matters' (eds. Opongo & Béré 2021:5). African community gathering is an important event for participative wisdom, a project for strengthening lives with wisdom. Under all circumstances of *baraza*, 'The values to be discussed are peace, freedom of speech, co-operation, interdependence, and humanness' (Nhlekisana 2016:150). The gathering is an encounter with the divine and nature, the inevitable *homothumadon* (togetherness) in life space where humans are not alone but co-creatures with God and other humans. After all, 'Life is when you are together, alone you are an animal' (Opoku 1978–1979:483). Insynchrony with African communality, Christians cannot separate themselves from others, lest they lose their humanity. Each member of the community adds value, and the contribution made grows that community. Passiveness destroys the community. Human completeness is experienced and achieved in a community. Indeed, 'Our humanity, in solitude and bereft of stimulation from others, remains incomplete' (Muya in Bujo & Muya 2011:127).

This kind of communal ecclesiology is expressed and can be explained through some African proverbs. For instance, *moseka phofu ya gaabo ga tshabe go swa lentswe* ('one fights incessantly on behalf of his or her community'). This speaks of a patriotic spirit that leads one to self-sacrifice on behalf of his people. Resane (2018) states:

[T]his Setswana proverb serves as a guideline, an appeal, or encouragement during the times of crises when intervention seems far-fetched. It carries a connotation of waiting patiently, of patriotism, standing for what rightly belongs to one, and perseverance during and after a dialogue. It is an African expression of remaining resilient and waiting for positive outcomes. The proverb is used in sociological context of human interactions aiming to find a solution, and in theological dialogue for the same intended solution. The roots and the meaning of the proverb orbits around the justice system in a Setswana culture (p. 1).

A community member here is not self-centred but moves forward for the sake of the people. To use the modern term, 'one puts his head on the block for the sake of his people'. This is the essence of *botho/ubuntu* in which one's interests come after others, a reversed worldview of the Western individualistic life approach. The biblical principle is clear:

[D]o nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (Phil 2:3–4 NIV).

African communality in line with communion ecclesiology, is in harmony with the fact that the individual should make the good of others the focus of his interest and strategy and work. The 'I, Me, Myself' perception of life has no space in African communality, just as the biblical communion is made by people sharing, participating, and cooperating.

## Conclusion

This article shows that the narrativity of theology is enriched through proverbial and idiomatic expressions. Theological dialogue, expression, and contextualisation are enriched through the proverbial application of expressing the truth. There is a value in addressing theology proverbially through the linguistic framework, that is familiar to people in their context. Decolonisation of theology is possible through these proverbs, as the process reveals the concealed truth embedded in the biblical text. African philosophy of *botho* is variously expressed through proverbs and idioms, and this can apply to communion ecclesiology in its essence. Christian doctrines and ethics are embedded within the proverbs, as they reveal teachings on morality, lifestyle, ethics and sociality in communities. African gregariousness is the African expression of *homothumadon* that binds people into a communion, which cannot easily disintegrate, as it governs itself through the precepts of Acts 2:42–47.

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