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THE DIMENSIONS OF HUMAN WORK ACCORDING TO JOHN SAMUEL MBITI

INTRODUCTION

We often hear people saying “I am going to work,” “I am looking for work,” or “I have a work to do.” When a farmer is going to till the ground to plant, or going to the river for fishing or cleaning the poultry, he would say “I am going to work.” So also, when a doctor is going to the hospital to attend to patients, he would say “I am going to work.” The same goes for a priest who is going to administer to his congregation. When a professor is going to the class to lecture, he would say “I am going to work.” Today in the world, work constitutes the major factor for immigration, which is why we see people leaving their countries and continents in search of work. It seems everything people do is within the realm or sphere of what is called work. What is work, then? Do Africans have the notion of work in their culture? Is work part of people’s way of life? We know that work belongs to human beings, not to animals. Everything we see around us is the effect of human work. Man is the causal agent of all the manufactured things around him. This of course excludes the universe of which man is not the creator of the cosmic bodies; nevertheless, his activities may shape or destroy created things.

The fundamental uniqueness of the human being is that he can rationally work and organise work for the good of himself and for the good of the community or the society in which he lives. Take away rationality from human beings and they become “inferior” to animals! This is because, naturally, the animal has a higher sensual capacity and activeness. The sensory

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powers of the animal for hearing, sighing, smelling, and reproduction are better equipped than those of man. I am not trying to prove the place of animals in the universe, but to make a point on the uniqueness of human rationality. From sunrise to sunset, man cannot do without work. Work is part of the being and survival of man in the world. Depriving an African man of work is like separating him from a religious value, or like removing a fish from the river, and dropping it on a dry ground.¹ Work is a specific activity of man: he alone is capable of work.² All the things that man uses in the world (except himself), are the hand work of man. For example, when we see the traditional farm tools, the canoes, ships, local weaving and milling factories, buildings, statues, and sculptures etc., we see the handwork of man. Working is a way of life for the African man or woman; it is part and parcel of their culture:

Culture covers many things, such as the people's ways of life, behaviours, actions, and their physical as well as intellectual achievements. Culture shows itself in art and literature, dance, music and drama, in the styles of building houses and of people's clothing, in social organisation and political systems, in religion, ethics, morals and philosophy, in the customs and institutions of the people, in their values and laws, and in their economic life. All these cultural expressions influence and shape the life of each individual in his society; and in turn the individual makes a cultural contribution to his community through participating in its life and in some cases through creative work.³

African traditional practices do not function in isolation from society. It is connected to the community; in other words, it is more communal than individual. Crucially, what an individual does have benefits the larger society. My concern in this article is to make a presentation of human work in African Traditional thought according to John Samuel Mbiti. I shall do this in the language that is familiar to modern thinkers and scholars, using an expository cultural account and explanation.

¹ John AGBAKWUO, *The Africa: His Religion and Cosmology* (Umuahia: Lumen Press, 2013), 9.

² Battista MONDIN, *Philosophical Anthropology* (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 2011), 173.

³ AGBAKWUO, *The Africa*, 9.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE NOTION OF WORK

The term work is associated with something that is done or performed by someone. It is an action that is carried out whether voluntary or required for one to do. In other words, work is a task. According to Ezea, in the German *werk* and *arbeit* we find words that are used in general term in relation to work and labour.⁴ The notion of work expresses physical labor, toil, and or skilled trade, and craft, or occupation, which an individual or a group of people do to earn some income. Whenever man or woman employs mental and physical energy to do something, they are said to be working. In this sense, work is therefore associated, in general sense with toil and labour. It is that human ability to affect a result through one's actions. Work is understood as human activity, which is designed to accomplish something needed and valued for its purpose in the society. It is very obvious, therefore, that work is essential in the life of man. Through work, man subdues nature. It is not possible for him to attain some level of advancement without work. Work is connected with man's day-to-day activities. A sincere person can never be idle in the sense of lacking what to do either by themselves or being provided by the society.

In his book, *Philosophical Anthropology*, Mondin describes work as every material and spiritual activity tending to a useful result.⁵ It means that man works when he uses his physical and mental powers towards doing something that may satisfy his basic needs. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* describes the concept of work as an expression that was commonly applied to manual or physical labour. The places of intellectual and spiritual activities for man were not emphasised. "But there is no satisfactory reason for excluding intellectual or other psychological effort from one's understanding of it."⁶ The question to ask here is: does the exclusion of intellectual and psychological in the definition of this notion connote that those human activities are not part of work? Again, scholars of economics use the term interchangeably with work force, labour force, or wage-earners.⁷ Here, the labourer is emphasised more than the labour. In other words, the worker is

⁴ Matthew EZE, *The ILO's Concept of Decent Work in the Light of the Social Teaching of the Church and its Relevance to Nigeria* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013), 183.

⁵ McDonald MONDIN, "Work, Theology of," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 14: 174.

⁶ WALTER, "Work," 1015.

⁷ David SILLS, ed., "Work Force," in *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (Chicago: Macmillan, The Free Press, 1968), 469.

used instead of the work. But this is right as we cannot, in the real sense of the word, separate man from working at every moment of his life. “Work is part and parcel of human life. Through work, man develops himself and realizes the possibilities or potentials which he is endowed; through work, man cares and provides for himself, he builds society as well as social order.”⁸ Encyclopedia Britannica uses the term labour than of work to denote:

Any valuable service rendered by a human agent in the production of wealth, other than accumulating and providing of capital or the assuming of the risks which are inseparable from the responsible planning and direction of business undertakings. It includes the services of manual labourers, but it covers many other kinds of services as well... A characteristic of all labour is that it uses time, in the specific sense that it consumes some part of the short days and years of human life.⁹

Again, it draws another distinction, which seems to apply to the face of human work, and which should not be confused with labour. “It is not synonymous with toil or exertion, and it has only a remote relation to ‘work done’ in the physical or physiological senses.”¹⁰ Economists acknowledge that “the application of the physical energies of men to the work of production is, of course, an element in labour, but skill and self-direction, within a larger or smaller sphere, are also elements” (535).

2. JOHN SAMUEL MBITI—THE PERSON AND CONTEXTS

John Samuel Mbiti (1931–2019), was one of the greatest African philosophers. In his book, *The Prayer of the African Religion*, Mbiti describes the African man or woman as an industrious being working for his or her “livelihood”.¹¹ In other words, he is a being in action. By this he meant that the African man cannot do without engaging himself with some form of activities whether physical, spiritual or communal. The book recorded a collection of over “two hundred and one” African prayers, which reveals three outstanding dimensions of human work in the traditional African society. Work

⁸ EZE, *The ILO's Concept*, 13.

⁹ Walter YUST, ed., “Labor,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica: A New Survey of Universal Knowledge* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1947), 13:535.

¹⁰ YUST, “Labor,” 535.

¹¹ John MBITI, *The Prayer of African Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1975), 62.

for him is therefore the activity which people perform for their “livelihood, particularly farming, healing, hunting and travelling” (62). For Mbiti, food and health are universal and fundamental concerns of mankind throughout the world. Humankind depends on work for its livelihood.

Like Mbiti, Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II), in his encyclical letter *Laborem Exercens*, states very concisely:

Through work man must earn his daily bread and contribute to the advance of science and technology and, above all, to elevate unceasingly the moral level of the society within which he lives in community with those who belong to the family. And work means any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances; it means any human activity that can and must be recognised as work, in the midst of all the many activities of man is capable of and to which he is predisposed by his very nature, by virtue of humanity itself. Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God himself, and he is placed in it in order to subdue the earth. From the beginning therefore he is called to work. Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from the rest of the creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work. Only man is capable to work, and only man works, at the same time by work occupying his existence on earth. Thus work bears a particular mark on man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within the community of persons. And this mark decides its interior characteristics; in a sense it constitutes its very nature.¹²

Livelihood may mean survival. In order to survive, therefore, man must work. One cannot contemplate living in an African traditional setting without thinking on how to work to meet the needs of oneself and those of the family. Self-work became so important and was emphasised in African communities that Nyerere, one of Africa’s nationalists, who in his political description of African socialism after the independence demonstrated the fact that “in traditional African society, everybody was a worker. There was no other means of earning a living for the community.”¹³ One must not be an employed worker or labourer before one is said to have work. Working

¹² JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical letter *Laborem exercens* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981), no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html.

¹³ Felix AGBARA, *The Possibility of Convivence in Nigeria: Towards Intercultural Hermeneutics and Religion in Dialogue* (Frankfurt: LIT Verlag, 2010), 133.

struggle for livelihood is something culturally with everyone within the community. Everyone works because work is worth doing.

According to African thinking, the creator endowed man with the ability to work for himself and nature. To till the ground or to exert energy to work has never being conceived in African thought as punishment from God or gods. But man has that special feature to perform an act that would be beneficial for him and his immediate environment. Work is therefore an organised activity of man by man and for man. The human being is the subject of work, that is to say, he is the “acting subject”¹⁴ the one who exerts the energy to work. The primacy of the person is the fact man is the subject of work, and at the same time independently of the work he or she does.¹⁵ Whatever man does or use energy to produce an effect on himself and the society is work. Work includes physical, spiritual and social capacity of the human being to produce desired effects. He put serious effort in doing this of course to achieve a desired goal. For example, during the agricultural period, man put a desirable effort in order to earn a rich harvest for himself and for the community. It is true that “human beings through the course of centuries have laboured to better the circumstances of their lives is good because it develops the person who, through such activity, learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself.”¹⁶ Africans believed that God gave man power to work since he is God’s creature. “It is held in all African societies that there is power in the universe, and it comes from God.”¹⁷ Man acknowledges this in dedication of their seeds and farming tools to God.

African traditional discussions are incomplete without the theme of God. This is because, according to African thinking, God is at the centre of man’s existence. The work of creation belongs to Him.¹⁸ The question here may arise, what God are we talking about? Is the African God the same with the God of Christianity? Mbiti was very clear in the question of the African

¹⁴ Daniel FINN, “Human Work in Catholic Social Thought,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 71, no. 4 (2012): 875.

¹⁵ Ferdinand TABLAN, “Ethical Implications of Catholic Social Teachings on Human Work for the Service Industry,” *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics* 3 (2014): Article 11, p. 4.

¹⁶ Deborah SAVAGE, *The Subjective Dimension of Human Work: The Conversation of the Acting Person According to Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II, and Bernard Lonergan* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 29.

¹⁷ OLANIYAN, Richard, ed., *African History and Culture* (Lagos: Longman Publications, 1982), 197.

¹⁸ John S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 39.

God. African culture is born within religion. Religion and culture cannot be separated. From time immemorial, Africans were very theistic. It has never been in the minds of Africans to say they don't know what they believe or they doubt whether there is God or not. The idea of God is part of their very being as a people. They believe that God is a Supreme Spirit, and the Absolute God is one. "There is but One Supreme God."¹⁹ Mbiti stresses the fact that God is the creator of the universe, of the spirits, of man and of animals.²⁰ Because God is Supreme Being, Africans place Him at the highest possible position and give Him the highest qualities such as the All-seeing and All-hearing, and All-knowing, and All-powerful.²¹ These expressions of God are found in the language of African people and in the names they call God. For example, the Akan people refer to God as "He who knows or sees all...", the Zulu (South Africa) and Banyarwanda (Rwanda) simply call him "the Wise One...", the Yorubas of Nigeria refer to him as "he who sees both the inside and outside of man, he is the Discerner of hearts..."; they call him *Olodumare* (the Powerful One). The Bena tribe of Tanzania believes that God "is everywhere at once..." the Ngombe praise God as "the All-powerful" and "the strong One..." (7-8). The attributes of God within African tribes remain the same as in ancient times, a clear indication of the African belief in the unchanging nature of the Supreme Being, whom they called God.

According to Mbiti,²² "people acknowledge that they are God's creatures. They tell him that they have no strength. In humility they ask him to bless their seeds, implements and themselves, in order to make good use of them by the power which comes from you, our creator". In the thoughts of Mbiti, there is no clear distinction between human work and human labour as the two for him are one and the same thing. Whatever form it takes, work is work! Like the *Adara* people of Kaduna-Nigeria the word for work is "*ilum*" this denotes whatever man does with his physical, spiritual or mental energy. It is a generic name for working as an activity, a task or a function. Anything that man does for his or her livelihood is given the name work. *ilum* on its own cannot be reduced to anything else other than what it is. In his analysis of one of the African prayers, Mbiti commented:

¹⁹ John S. MBITI, *Concepts of God in Africa* (Southampton: The Camelot Press, 1970), xiv.

²⁰ John S. MBITI, *An Introduction to African Religion* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975), 32.

²¹ MBITI, *Concepts of God*, 3.

²² MBITI, *The Prayer*, 62.

The people ask God to cause their crops to grow and bear abundantly. It is also a prayer for women to conceive, and for protection against thorns, snake bites, and dangerous winds, as people go about their work. All labour of sowing, cultivating in the fields depends on rain. Therefore, God is besought to pour out the rain, as we pour water from the pot. (62)

Mbiti discussed in his work what I called the three dimensions or faces of human work in African traditional culture. These dimensions of human work include the physical face, the spiritual face, and the communal or social face. These are not presented in any chronological order as we are not here classifying them in degrees of order or hierarchy.

3. THE PHYSICAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN WORK

The understanding of “physical toil” dominates the concept of work in African culture. Whether labour or work, it is characterised by the use of energy, time and the specificity of the activity. And he does it with some kind of subjective or personal benefits to himself. Man first conceives the idea of work or action before he executes them in the real world. By “real world” I do not mean the platonic real world here, but the physical world where man’s actions are carried out and felt.

For example, agricultural activities in the whole of African settings require the use of physical force to till the ground, plant or to harvest. And in the process, rituals may be carried out. The Ashanti people of Ghana at the commencement of farming season, offering of local fowls and yams are offered to the protector of the earth and seeking for rich harvest.²³ The physical dimension includes the idea of paid work or labour was also traditional practice by Africans. For instance, the man must work in the field for a specified period of farming season before the bride is given to him. People also work in exchange for cowries, and for food stuff, etc. Africans, however, came to adopt the colonial way of labour with the introduction of foreign currencies as the legal tender or medium of exchange. We are not discussing here the social condition of human work in African thought. According to Keletso, “Africans were motivated by combination of many needs and desires.”²⁴

²³ Geoffrey PARRINDER, *African Traditional Religion* (Sheldon Press, 1962), 83.

²⁴ Keletso ATKINS, *The Moon is Dead, Give us our Money: The Cultural Origins of An African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900* (Portsmouth: Heinemann Publications, 1993), 27.

A person works because of some needs and desires. Again, we can say that action is connected with intention. Intention here could be the innate desire to meet the need of one or another, and then one is pushed to go and act or do something. One important feature here is that paid work is undertaken by contract or through an agreement, and until this agreement is fulfilled, the required exchange may not be given or satisfied.

For Mbiti, the sense of human work is not looked in the way of something only for the slave or the poor. The three dimensions of human work belong to all peoples. Everyone works. The physical and personal face of human work is concerned with man's daily activity to secure what is needed for himself and his family. Here, man put his sweat into work: agriculture, fishing, and hunting. It goes to say that work is an activity on creation or nature. Through work man establishes a working relationship with nature.

Agricultural activities consume the lives of traditional Africans. In offering prayers before farming, they say:

O Earth, wherever it be my people dig, be kindly to them. Be fertile when they give the little seeds to your keeping. Let your generous warmth nourish them and your abundant moisture germinates them. Let them swell and sprout, drawing life from you, and burgeon under your fostering care: and soon we shall redden your bosom with the blood of goats slain in your hour, and offer to you the first fruits of your munificence, first fruits of millet and oil of sesame, of gourds and cucumbers and deep-mashed melons. O trees of forest and glade fall easily under the axe. Be gentle to my people. Let no harm come to them. Break on limb in your anger. Crush no one in your displeasure. Be obedient to the woodman's wishes and fall as he would have you fall, not perversely nor stubbornly, but as his axe directs.²⁵

The spiritual leader continues to invoke the nature to give respect to the works of man on the trees, and the rivers, etc., by saying:

Submit yourselves freely to my people, as this tree has submitted itself to me. The axe rings, it bites into the tough wood. The tree totters and falls. The lightning flashes, its fear fire at the heart of the wood. The tree totters and falls. Before the lightning, the tree falls headlong, precipitate, knowing neither direction nor guidance. But the woodman guides the tree where he wills and lays it to rest gently and with deliberation. Fall, O trees of forest and glade, even as this tree was fallen, hurting no one, obedient, observant of my will. O rivers and streams,

²⁵ MBITI, *The Prayer*, 69–70.

where the woodman has laid bare the earth, where he has hewn away the little bushes and torn out encumbering grass, there let your waters overflow. Bring down the leafy mould from the forest and the fertilizing silt from the mountains. When the rains swell your banks, spread out your waters and lay your rich treasures on our gardens. Conspire together, O earth and rivers: conspire together O earth and rivers and forests. Be gentle and give us plenty from your teeming plenty. (69–70)

It is very clear in African thought that nature has soul! Man communicates with these natural elements as if they were or are intelligible beings. He treats nature in the manner of a person. Man personifies nature in order to communicate with it. This shows how man is in constant harmony with nature, especially the earth, because the earth swallows his remains at death. “Nature’s riches are not to be exploited carelessly or lightly: man treats nature as he would treat a friend, with respect” (70).

Through work, man uses nature in a protective way. In African tradition, man does not use nature anyhow:

Man has also to express his gratitude at least to the earth by offering first fruits and the blood of goats. All these sentiments show man’s wish to have a harmonious relationship with nature, without treating nature exclusively as a utility. If man abuses nature, nature will, in turn, abuse him. (63)

The protection of the planet Earth and all the God-given resources have been in the mind of the African farmer or worker. There was the idea of the fear of the anger of the universe or what we now call “the global warming or climate change” in the thinking of the African man or woman. Today, people are crying and spending trillions of dollars for the protection of the earth, which out of her carelessness has abused in many ways.

4. THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN WORK

Another face or dimension of human work in African thought is the spiritual face. Many would think that work is purely a physical thing. It encompasses the realm of pure manual activities. Mbiti notes, “In all human activities, there is an element of the unforeseen, of chance, which lies beyond human powers or control. It is the co-operation of this dimension which man

needs in his work, so that both the physical and the spiritual dimensions can harmonise to make man's work productive and a source of joy."²⁶

The spiritual face of human activity can also be seen in the same line of mental reflections. In African thought, mental or intellectual aspects of man are considered the spiritual powers endowed to man by God. This face is the domain of spiritual or religious leaders; medicine men, diviners, mediums, seers, priests, ritual elders, rain makers, and soothsayers. Each of them has their functions distinct from the other. They connect the physical world with spirit world; spirits beings, ancestral ghost, and the Spirit who is God. "Religious leaders are the keepers of religious treasures and of religious knowledge. They are wise, intelligent and talented people, often with outstanding abilities and personalities."²⁷

Through the actions of the spiritual leaders, the work of man is sanctified, and dedicated to the God or gods. By this, man "acknowledges the strength and help of sources outside of his domain, sources that in African experience are spiritual. In this way, whether working in the fields, fishing in the river, or administering medicine to the sick, man treading on a path in which the physical and the spiritual intermingle"²⁸

The traditional priest offers prayers and sacrifices to God on behalf of the people for whatever reason. He is the link between the worlds of the physical and the divine. In the collected supplications of the priest and diviner, they say:

Ye divinities, come and accept this wine and drink. Ye ghosts, come and accept this wine and drink. Trees and *lianae*, come and accept this wine and drink. God, who alone is great [*Nyankonpon Tweadumpon*], it was you who beget me, come and accept this wine and drink. Spirit of the earth, come and accept this wine and drink. Spirit of pools, come and accept this wine and drink. Come, all of you, and accept this wine and drink. Stand behind me with a good standing, and let me be possessed with a good possession. (72)

Again, the medicine man also employs the help of the divine in this way:

O thou who rulest strength, thou Spirit or virile energy, Thou canst do all, and without thee, I am powerless, I am powerless; I who am consecrated to thee, I who am pledged to thee, O Spirit, from thee I get my strength, my power. Thou

²⁶ MBITI, *The Prayer*, 68.

²⁷ MBITI, *Concepts of God*, 150.

²⁸ MBITI, *The Prayer*, 68.

brought me the gift. Spirit of force, I call thee. Acknowledge my call. Come, come. Thou must come, I gave thee what thou asked me, The sacrifice has been given, sacrifice has been given in the forest; Spirit, I am thine, thou art mine, come to me. (72)

Work is part and parcel of the cultural and religious expression of all classes of people in African societies. The various communal rituals and rites from the various tribes of Nigeria, for example, the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are considered as spiritual activities, and are the people's lifestyle.²⁹ Work cannot be reduced only to manual or physical activities. Work has the mental and spiritual dimension.³⁰ The work of the spiritual leaders includes meditation and contemplation. This is like a form of prayer, but is more of a spiritual exercise through which the person transcends the world of physical reality to contemplating the spiritual world. When this happens, and especially when the spiritual leader experiences some kind of trances, he or she is said to be in dialogue with the gods or God.

5. THE COMMUNAL OR SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN WORK

More so, on the communal or social face of human work, the life of the African man or woman in general is meaningless if it is not connected with the other person or persons in the society in which he lives. Communal works are those kinds of works that are done by the community of people. This work varies from one kind or the other depending on the subject matter of the work. It could be communal farming, picking grains, cleaning market squares, rolling heavy logs of wood, building food storages, and houses, etc. They do this to show their common existence as community of persons.

This understanding is very clear to Copleston when he remarks, "Men are not independent of one another, but need the aid and cooperation of others in the production of the necessities of life."³¹ The individual person has no communal significance if he or she does not participate in the communal life of the society. One cannot be too sufficient not to identify with the society in

²⁹ EZENWEKE ET AL., *Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy* (Jos: Augustinian Publications, 2012), 123.

³⁰ AGBARA, *The Possibility of Convivence*, 132.

³¹ Frederick COPLESTON, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome* (London: Bloomsbury, 1964), 225.

terms of communal works. In fact, “the sense of community as African value can be seen as rooted in an anthropological vision of life, involving recognition of a human identity in relation to the community” (130). Communal work gives the opportunity for interaction and cultural socialization. Knowing the well-being of one another was a duty for all members. This understanding does not exclude individual person or family effort to work for their own. Even if for example, the individual make a rich harvest from his or her farm, a good part of the produce goes to the market for the benefit of those who have no land to farm but can have the medium of exchange for the goods.

Social or communal work in African culture is done for the common good. No one works completely for his own benefits. He does it for the benefits of others. Group work, family work, clan, age group, etc., dominates this face of human work in African culture. An individual can fight for the good of his community. For instance, the victory of Okafo led the women of his community to sing a victorious song, “Who will wrestle for our village? Okafo will wrestle for our village. Has he thrown a hundred men? He has thrown a hundred men. Has he thrown a hundred Cats? He has thrown a hundred Cats. Then send him word to fight for us.”³²

Communal work is central to the economic development of a people. In ancient time as in today, unity of purpose is vital to every society’s development. Coming together to work for the good of the entire community is the greatest sign of unity. Community life is mostly celebrated in communal activities.

The nature of communal work is becoming less attractive especially in the towns and cities of African states due to Western influence. People are becoming too individualistic. They prefer to do things alone than with others. Despite this fact, communal work is still strongly practiced in the rural areas. Working together is a thing of joy and it gives value and dignity to what they do. Serious communal work like farming, or fishing or harvesting usually go with traditional drumming and music to keep their morals high. Work is precious if it is done with others.

³² Chinua ACHEBE, *Things Fall Apart* (Edinburgh: Heinemann Publications, 1958), 41.

CONCLUSION

Our discussion so far seems to answer the question whether Africans have the concept of human work or labour in their traditional thoughts. Mbiti in some of his treatises presented this notion of human work. Work dominates the very existence of the African person. He or she cannot do without work. Not to work in African thinking clearly connotes non existence.

Man must be in touch with nature through work. The African man depends on work for his livelihood. Everything around man is the product of work. Even the cosmic bodies, the African person would tell you “they are the works of God.” Work, therefore, is the ability of humans, which comes from God to put into action desired results. People work to earn their living and for the good of the society.

It is very clear that Mbiti did not stop his understanding of work at the sphere of physical labour, but goes also to the sphere of the spiritual or mental and communal or social spheres. For whatever form it takes, work is for the good of man. Through work he provides himself with food, shelter and medicine, which are fundamental requirements for people everywhere in the world.

This expository presentation of the dimensions of work by Mbiti will make us to ask further questions such as: what actually comprises the domain of work in African culture? What can we term as the philosophy of work in African perspective? What is the philosophy of action in African context? This work of course raises an important human issue as far as human work is concerned. The value of human work in African culture cannot be overemphasized. The discussion on human work in African thinking by Mbiti, could be compared with that of a western Catholic thinker, Saint John Paul II in his discussion on human work. The above questions, if answered in the most philosophical way, will therefore lead African scholars to the development of an “African philosophy of human work” now or in the future.

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THE DIMENSIONS OF HUMAN WORK ACCORDING TO JOHN SAMUEL MBITI

Summary

Down through the ages, man has been a worker for his own good and the good of the society in which he lives. John Samuel Mbiti has described work as man's activities in the face of the universe for his livelihood. Every individual human being is engaged in one form of work or the other. In order to explain the essence of human work in African culture, Mbiti made statistical collections of African prayers. His research and discoveries revealed three facets of human work: the physical, spiritual and the communal dimensions. All that a typical African traditional man or woman does is surrounded within these dimensions. We cannot deny the fact that all that we see around us are the products of human work. Man's capacity to work is revealed in work! The African man has been a hardworking individual through the ages, and his livelihood depends on work. For him or her, work is everything!

Keywords: Mbiti; human work/labour; dimensions; African prayer; African culture; spiritual leaders; society; community

WYMIARY LUDZKIEJ PRACY WEDŁUG JOHNA SAMUELA MBITIEGO

Streszczenie

Na przestrzeni wieków człowiek pracował dla pożytku własnego i społeczeństwa, w którym żyje. John Samuel Mbiti opisuje pracę jako działalność człowieka na tle wszechświata służącą zapewnieniu sobie środków do życia. Każda istota ludzka jest zaangażowana w taką czy inną formę pracy. Aby wyjaśnić istotę ludzkiej pracy w kulturze afrykańskiej, Mbiti statystycznie opracował zbiory afrykańskich modlitw. Jego badania i odkrycia ujawniły trzy wymiary ludzkiej pracy: fizyczny, duchowy i wspólnotowy. Wszystko, co robi typowy afrykański tradycyjny mężczyzna lub kobieta, zawiera się w tych wymiarach. Nie możemy zaprzeczyć, że wszystko, co widzimy wokół nas, jest produktem ludzkiej pracy. Zdolność człowieka do pracy ujawnia się w pracy! Afrykańczyk przez wieki wykonywał ciężką pracę, więc jego utrzymanie zależy od pracy. Dla niego praca jest wszystkim!

Słowa kluczowe: Mbiti; ludzka praca; wymiary; afrykańska modlitwa; afrykańska kultura; przywódcy duchowi; społeczeństwo; społeczność