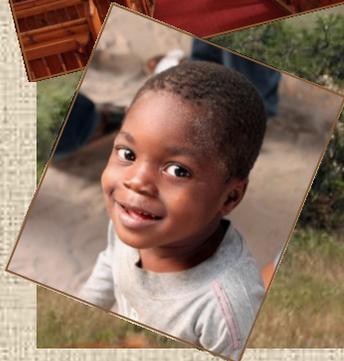


# JOURNEY THROUGH AFRICA

An Exploration of  
Theology in Context





# SOUTH AFRICA



When Julie and I embarked on our journey to three countries in Africa, I committed to learning everything I could about the ways in which African theology differed from my own Western understanding. What I found, however, is that while there are many differences, there are also many similarities.

“Henri Bouillard once said that a theology that is not up-to-date is a false theology. I think we can paraphrase Bouillard by saying that a theology that is not somehow reflective of our times, our culture, and our current concerns – and so contextual – is also a false theology. Charles Kraft says practically the same thing when he says that a theology, when it is perceived as irrelevant, is *in fact* irrelevant.”



**A Zulu warrior consults a Sangoma (diviner/healer)**

Sangomas are able to access advice and guidance from the ancestors for their patients in three ways: possession by an ancestor (channeling), throwing bones, or interpreting dreams. When a Sangoma is possessed by an ancestor, she works herself into a trance through drumming, dancing and chanting, and then she allows her ego to step aside so her ancestor can possess her body and communicate directly with the patient, providing specific information about his problems. It can be very dramatic, with the Sangoma speaking in tongues or foreign languages (according to the specific ancestor) or dancing fervently beyond her normal ability.

Sangomas are asked to wear many social and political hats. Besides divination and healing, they also direct rituals, find lost cattle, protect warriors, and act as

narrators of history and myths of their tradition. They are seen as the social workers in their community. They know the local dynamics and often use this knowledge to counsel those in need of their services.

Sangomas are highly revered among their communities where they act as a go-between for the living and the dead.

Sangomas are traditional healers in Zulu culture. They provide diagnosis through divination, consulting their ancestors for advice and guidance. They work in a sacred healing hut called a “Ndumba” where their ancestors reside. When greeting a Sangoma, you say “Makhosi,” which means “Gods.” You might also say, “We greet the gods.”



**The diviner in red is an apprentice**

A Sangoma is called into the ministry of healing by an initiation illness, such as psychosis, headache, intractable stomach pain, or shoulder or neck complaints. She then has to undergo a period of training, which, among other things, instructs her in the use of “muti,” which are medicines with spiritual significance.



Dancing and drumming are essential to the lives of African people, and it is seen clearly in the areas of healing and divination.



# SIGHT SEEING



This is a view of Cape Town, South Africa from Table Mountain.



## Rock Hyrax

The Hyrax closely resembles an overweight guinea pig. They live in groups and can be found all over Table Mountain, seemingly unbothered by the noisy presence of so many people. The closest living relative to the Hyrax is the elephant!

Male weavers build nests for females. If she rejects it, she'll knock it out of the tree and he must start over.



A couple of eland graze in Nairobi National Park



A Burmese python is said to be one of the six largest snakes in the world. They average twelve feet long and are very smooth and graceful.



We went to a snake and crocodile park. We could have had lunch inside a crocodile pit, but Julie didn't like the idea.



Julie and Joseph hopped out of the car for a Kodak moment with a giraffe.

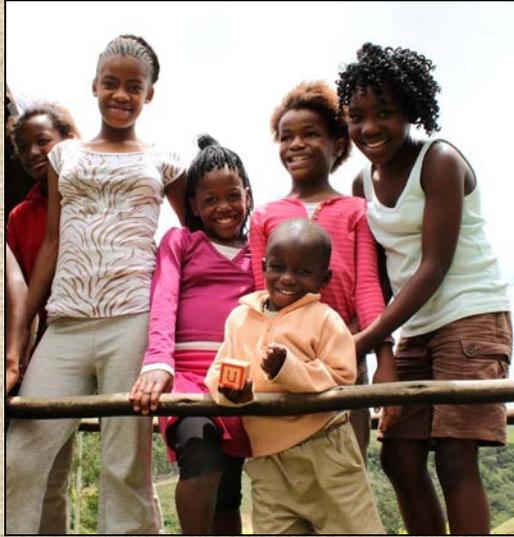
# REHOBOTH

## CHILDREN'S VILLAGE



Near the town of Port Shepstone, but buried deep in the South African bush is a haven for children who are living with HIV/AIDS. Rehoboth is a Christian orphanage whose mission it is to provide safe and comfortable housing with intensive treatment in the areas of spiritual, emotional, intellectual, physical and medical needs.

The name "Rehoboth" comes from Genesis 26:22. Rehoboth means "to receive space to flourish in the land." The symbolism behind the name Rehoboth is that God is the One providing room (space) to take care of orphaned children who have no families to look after them. It is Rehoboth's hope that these children will grow and flourish into mature and healthy adults.



The staff at Rehoboth provide psychotherapy, play therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech therapy. Also, outside therapists are sometimes called in to provide deeper diagnoses for some of the emotional hurts and needs of the often traumatized children.

KwaZulu-Natal has become the AIDS capitol of the world. 12% of South Africans are HIV positive and in 2008 there were 2.5 million AIDS orphans.



Children are raised in a home with a local housemother and five "siblings." The moms care for the children like they are her own, which gives the orphan a new loving family. Local housemothers are recruited by word of mouth. They are women with "a mother's heart" who undergo a training program in the daily care of children with HIV. Mothers care for the children 21 days a month with two breaks of 4 days each. The same relief staff will always look after the children while the housemother is away in order to give stability and strengthen the bonding process.



A common myth among Africans has been that when infected with the HIV, the only cure is to have sex with a virgin. As a result, the age of virgins has decreased while the number of children with HIV has increased.





Traditional orphanages are overcrowded and are not equipped to meet the special needs of children infected with HIV. Rehoboth is unique in that they specialize in the care of these children. In fact, a positive status is required for admission to their facilities. Without Rehoboth, the life expectancy of these children is only one to two years.

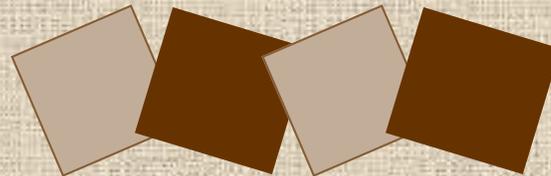


Children are encouraged to be physically active. Options include swimming, dancing lessons, pony-riding, beach outings, mountain biking and supervised play on their own multi-sports field and jungle gyms.

Research shows that hospitals are housing an increasing number of children with AIDS who cannot be placed back home, but the nursing staff have no way of giving them adequate time and attention, so the children's health declines rapidly.



In order for the children to be able to understand their disease and be more self-sufficient, the staff explain it to them with simple cartoon pictures.



**Mr. Blob (blood cell) is being threatened by Mr. Spike (virus).**

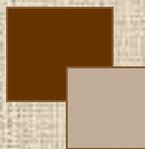
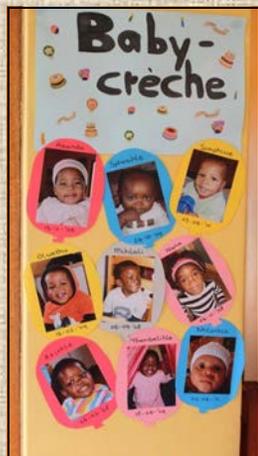
Morning devotions are part of everyday life. Bible studies are held for staff on a regular basis and the children in pre-primary daycare have additional devotions. The primary schools, which the children attend, are also Christian-based. The children receive daily prayer and are taught how to pray. The housemothers are encouraged to raise the children on biblical principles.

**When the child swallows the pill...**

**...the pill cuts all the points off Mr. Spike so he can't hurt Mr. Blob.**

**So when Mr. Spike attacks, Mr. Blob can fight him off.**

**So now the child has lots of strong Mr. Blobs in their body!**



Rehoboth runs an early year's education program in the form of a pre-primary day care center, to prepare the children for going to primary school. They also provide a toddler- and baby-daycare for the little ones. The older children are taken to different primary schools, where they receive quality education.

Though a child may be diagnosed with HIV, medical treatment is not provided until the disease has progressed to a highly symptomatic stage. Rehoboth provides medical care immediately, significantly increasing the child's chances of survival.



# LGBT MINISTRY



Good Hope MCC in Cape Town, South Africa has been 100% lay-led church for many years. They have been around for twenty-seven years and are seen as a leader among MCC churches in Africa.



Gender DynamiX is an organization in Cape Town that does advocacy work across South Africa, stretching into other African countries. Julie had a chance to sit down with Liesl Theron to discuss potential partnership in the future as well as opportunities for distributing The Children Are Free.

Dominic Kessel is one of the ten lay leaders at Good Hope MCC. He expressed that churches in Africa need training for their clergy and lay leaders. There is also a need for more resources within the denomination that are relevant to the African context.



Rev Michael Kimindu, Neema (Grace) MCC Nairobi, Kenya

Neema MCC meets at the center for HIV awareness and prevention



Michael Kimindu has been the pastor of Neema MCC for four years, serving as a religious resource to LGBT people and their families in Nairobi.



The church used to consist of fifteen to twenty people, but has dwindled down to only three members. Please pray that God will work in the ministry of Neema MCC so they can reach out to more gay and trans Christians who need a positive support network.





(Cont'd from left)  
 Brent says he had made several failed attempts to “go straight,” and after deep soul-searching he acknowledged that he had always identified as male. In 2005 he underwent his transition from female to male. “Your sexuality should never conflict with your faith. Transgender persons have been accused of playing God or questioning God’s wisdom, but God wants the heart, God wants YOU.”

The couple has established the TransFormation Ministry whose core principle is to fill the gaps in the area of transgender relationships: relationship with self, with God, with a partner, and with family and friends. Julie has been involved in church since the age of nine and after her Music Education degree, began a ten-year tenure as the Minister of Worship at LifeJourney Church. She is currently completing her Master’s Degree in Social Work. She and Brent have been a couple for five years now, and they are both writers.

When Michael learned we were coming to Nairobi, he asked me to tell my story to the local transgender group.



(Cont'd from left)  
 Brent and Julie believe that God can use you to transform the world and make a positive impact, regardless of who you are, what you do or even how you identify. They say a good majority of gender minorities are often taught that they have to change so that God can love them. Brent says that their ministerial work is not to pressure or try to convert someone, but in essence, to bring God to them, rather than try to take people to God.

**TransFormation through Ministry**  
 Gay Kenya, Jan, 2012  
 Written by Jane Wothaya

From a distance, Brent and Julie Walsh look like an ordinary couple; that is until they reveal their extraordinary story of admirable faith and courage. Brent is a transgender minister and together with his partner Julie, has traversed the world preaching and talking about transgender issues at churches worldwide. They both also serve as guest speakers and panelists in transgender awareness forums, and offer advice and support through social networks to people around the world.

The couple is on a mission in Africa and have visited South Africa, Kenya and onwards to Ghana. During their visit in Kenya, they were hosted by Reverend Michael Kimindu. They held a service at the GALCK centre and also met members of Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) who meet and worship in Kinoo. The (MCC) is an international Protestant Christian denomination and the Fellowship has a specific outreach to gay, bisexual, and transgender families and communities.

“Our ministerial mission is mainly focused on LGBT persons around the world and more specifically for me, transgender persons. We also minister to MCC congregations and LGBT based churches”, says Brent. “I struggled for a long time with my identity and the situation was further compounded by the strong urge to serve God through ministry”, he adds.

**Website:**  
[www.transformationministry.org](http://www.transformationministry.org)



There is a critical need for leadership training in the Nairobi transgender community. With an enthusiastic trans presence, however, there is hope for a bright future.



Joseph Nyaisa Nyachiro is the pastor of a MCC house church in Kinoo, Kenya, a town outside Nairobi. He ministers primarily to sex workers and their families.



We met with John Makokha at Other Sheep Africa to discuss the translation of The Children Are Free into Swahili.





# KENYA



Mary Mwende with her mother, Stella.

One of the most devastating forces in Kenya, as with most African countries, is poverty. ChildFund International started in 1938 with a desire to build orphanages for the children who were left without homes or families in the wake of the second Sino-Japanese War. It has since turned into a global force that understands children's experiences of deprivation, exclusion and vulnerability. ChildFund is currently in 31 countries, assisting approximately 13.5 million children and their family members.

Standing outside Mary's house. Her front door is the curtain on the left side of the photo.

Mary led us to her home in the slum where she lives.

Julie and I have been sponsoring Mary Mwende through ChildFund International for several years. It was great to finally meet her and her family.



Mary gave us a tour of her slum. She was completely taken with Julie!

Mary, her mother Stella, and the ChildFund International staff spent all day with us, showing off their community.



Our visit was made complete when we were allowed to give gifts to Mary and her family. There were games, soccer balls, blankets, shoes, towels and art supplies, but everything else disappeared when she laid eyes on her very own doll!



It was hard to say goodbye, but we didn't leave empty handed. We left with a camera full of memories and a heart full of love for the child we had only seen on paper before now.





# SLUM THEOLOGY



**“Can a non-African do African theology? We must answer, from one point of view, with a firm no. A person who does not fully share one’s experience is not to be fully trusted to speak of God in that person’s context. Non-Africans do not know how Africans feel or perceive reality; whites cannot begin to understand the subtle ways in which blacks experience not only overt prejudice but also the more subtle oppression of invisibility and inaudibility..... Try as they might, nonparticipants ultimately bring their own feelings, perceptions, experiences, and privilege into a situation, and however slightly, this foreignness works to distort theology in the other context.” (Cont’d below)**



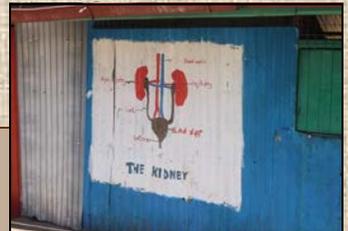
I frequently asked myself how a person could believe in God when they live in this kind of place. But many people here hold fast to their Christian faith in the midst of their dire circumstances.



Education is delivered by whatever means available, even if it’s on the side of the school building. The building is made of a line of shipping containers and the outside walls are painted with educational charts.



**“On another level, to a certain extent and in limited ways, people who do not fully share the experience of the other can contribute to the development of a contextual theology. In some cases, an outsider may be more in tune with a particular culture than many of those who were born within it. If a person approaches a culture or context openly, is willing to learn the necessary language, and is willing to read and appropriate literature about a particular culture, he or she can understand much of what a particular culture is about. In this case, the nonparticipant in a context can point out many things that the participants have never seen or have never attended to.”**





# GHANA



“Africans do not so much observe rituals in their lives as they ritualize their lives.”

“Theologically speaking, it is God’s drum (Drum Himself) which beats the note that is never sounded; it is God’s drum which affirms the possibility of continuing vitality within the music. In Africa the passenger cars and trucks which bear the motto ‘Except God’ express this basis of faith: all that we can say, all that we can do, all that we can know, all truth may be applied to all things, except God. From an African religious perspective, anything in the world, no matter how powerful or effective, is limited, and in Africa the individual and the Creator God seem to have very few direct dealings beyond the basic humility and personal confidence that distinguish faith and inform action.” (Chernoff, p157)

“If I were to play drums, the ancestral drummers would tell me what to do and would guide my hands.”



This boy invited me to come dance with him. When I put the camera to my face to take a picture, he was perplexed and then hid from me. Then he came out again and insisted that I dance with him. But dancing does not mean to me what it means to him.



“If you have been danced since you were in your mother’s womb, rhythm can take on the dimensions of a cultural



A woman dances the Agbekor at a funeral for a member of the Thunder God Shrine.

“Rhythms are built into the way people relate to each other.”

Babies will often be seen fast asleep tied to their mothers’ backs as the air around them is filled with loud, pulsing drumbeats and while everyone, including the mother, is dancing along with the music.

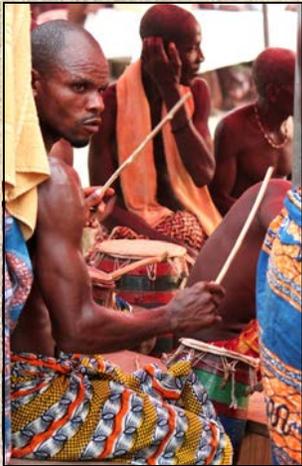
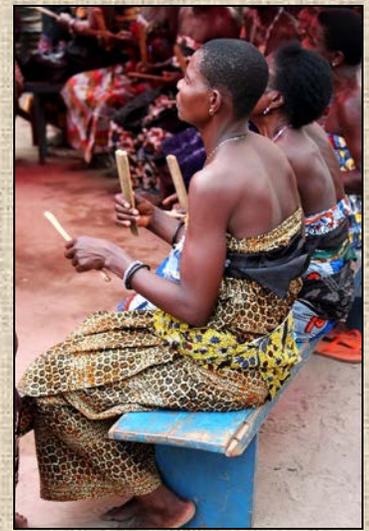
“Dance in Africa celebrates lives, commemorates death, consummates alliances, is part of the everyday lifeworld. We have nothing comparable in Western society, where danced bodies have been relegated to nightclubs, weddings, high school proms, and the occasional concert stage. In Africa, who you are often has much to do with how you dance.”

“Agbekor is a highly standardized dance based on traditional Ewe dance movements combined with stylizations of movements from warfare. It is performed at funerals and festivals.”





We are pouring libation to the ancestors to request blessing on our stay at Dagbe Cultural Center.



Like the Zulus in South Africa, the Ewes in Ghana commune with their ancestors. The difference is that the Ewes do not claim to seek possession from their ancestors. Rather, they are possessed by their fetish gods.



“At a musical event, the values of African traditional wisdom are integrated into a style of communication which is both musical and social.”

“The African drummer concerns himself as much with the notes he does not play as with the accents he delivers.”



“Facility with rhythms is something people learn as they grow up in an African culture.”



“A village that has no organized music or neglects community singing, drumming, or dancing is said to be dead.”  
– J.H. Kwabena Nketia

# EWE POSSESSION

“In Brekete shrines of West Africa ancient rhythms move bodies in spectacular ways. The power of repetition, inscribed in a soundscape of welcome and praise, calls northern gods to possess their devotees.”



Northern gods dancing through their devotees at a triennial cow sacrifice



Onset of Possession



Gorovoduwo fetishes gathered together in pans to receive the sacrifice

“When Bangle rides, he puts [the woman] through paces she couldn’t possibly imagine performing in her everyday life: spinning at a high rate of speed for fifteen or twenty revolutions and then landing on one foot precisely on the last stroke of the bell pattern to continue a dance that had been going on for hours; or sitting on the sharp end of a short spear, supporting a Brekete drummer on each leg while gunpowder is being set off in her outstretched palms. She, of course, knew nothing of the matter. Her knowledge of possession is restricted to arrivals and departures, of going into and out of trance, everything in between a total blank.”



## MAJOR GODS

- |                |                                       |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| Kunde          | Father and Hunter                     |
| Ablewa         | Mother                                |
| Sanya Kompo    | God of the stone, linguist, secretary |
| Bangle/Ketetsi | Warrior and soldier                   |
| Sakra Bode     | God of the land and Bangle’s stool    |
| Wango          | God of the waters and roads           |

“Death can provide evidence of things unseen, and the way a chicken dies – more precisely, the position in which a chicken expires – reveals the will of the gods. If it dies on its back, it means assent; if on its stomach, refusal.”



“Not everyone who joins Brekete gets ‘married’ to the gods. In [many shrines] with some two hundred members, perhaps only twenty or so are *trosiwo* (married to a god), three-quarters of them women. The gods choose only those who are worthy of their attention, those who follow the tenets of the shrine and keep the taboos.”



Bangle/Ketetsi as gorovodu fetish

*Brekete* – A drumming rhythm said to be from the north, always played during Gorovodu ceremonies (so identified with Gorovodu that some communities call the Gorovodu order itself brekete).

*Fetish* – divinity, vodu, or tro, especially in its form as god-object or sacred sculpture (or collage) but also, among vodu worshipers, the god in spirit form (including its manifestation during possession).

*Juju (or bovodu or ebo)* – amoral fetish magic, the manipulation of natural ingredients for personal gain or revenge, said to be often (but not necessarily) harmful or even fatal for some victims.

*Trosi* – Spirit host or wife (whether man or woman) of tro (vodu or fetish), susceptible to possession trance, required to administer to the needs of the husband vodu (male or female spirit), and through whom the vodu speaks and dances during possession trance.

# CHURCH OF PENTECOST

## KOPEYIA, GHANA



As with other religions, Christians believe in possession. But it is said to be a constant state of being. The Holy Spirit often works miracles through His devotees. And in some traditions, the Holy Spirit is said to verbally speak through his followers. It's called "speaking in tongues," and it only happens if your heart is pure.

In an interview with a leader of this church, I discovered that while the grace of God through Christ is preached here, it is still a contextual theology affected by ancient religions. There is fear that if you show too much camaraderie with people from fetish shrines (especially if you eat meat offered to fetish gods), then God will turn his face from you—you will not be protected from harm, your business will suffer, your family might be vulnerable to fetish curses—until you repent and seek deliverance from the evil that you were subjected to.

Music is a critical element of the church service here. When visitors come to church for the first time, they are asked to stand before the congregation and introduce themselves and then sing a song.

The woman pictured to the right had scars on her face that would indicate she had some past affiliation with the Thunder God shrine. It is said that when one leaves the shrine, it can result in losing one's family and friends.



Visitors are asked to sing because music has a way of bringing people together. In this culture, inviting you to share your music is a way of honoring you.



"On religious occasions, they hear drums instead of an organ."

"African religions [are] 'danced faiths,' in which worship becomes a style of movement that manifests one's relatedness for all to see."



When the New Testament talks about being cheerful givers, it is not lost on the people of this church. There were several opportunities to give, including a contest between men and women for a missions offering. Giving is led by God's spirit of thanksgiving.



Most people didn't pay any attention to the camera in my hand. Others did.

### Offering communion

Whether it is a shrine or the Christian church, conversion often comes after a healing. When someone is sick and their own god is not healing them, they might seek after other gods. When they find healing, they often convert to the god who healed them.

The man of the house is the one who decides which religion is right for the family. If he converts, everyone converts. This can be traumatic for some family members.



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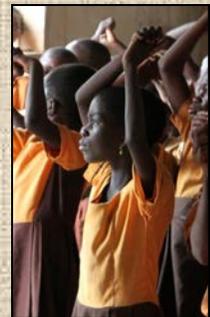
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All photos taken by Brent Walsh with the exception of the ones on the page called "Ewe Possession," which appear from Friedson's book, *Remains of Ritual*.