

CITYtheology

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**WHEN MAN AND
WOMAN WERE IN
THE ALUORA:**

EXPLORING AN
ECOLOGY OF
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WHEN MAN AND WOMAN WERE IN THE ALUORA: AND HOW CAN WE BE SO AGAIN?

Revd Dr George Otieno, Academic Dean of Msalato Theological College, Dodoma, Tanzania, explores the Luo People's Ecology of Interdependence with Nature as a path to integration and wholeness for people and the land.

From antiquity a Nilotic group known as the Luo people viewed themselves culturally as one with nature. This people knew that they and the life-giving earth were creatures of the same *Nyasaye* (God), almighty Creator: they both received his breath of life and they both carried the same divine motif in their *aluora*. *Aluora* is a Luo term for a bonding space comprised of the soil, society and the spirituality of life.

In this way, Luo people organised their lives around the same seasons and cycles of the moon; were washed by the same rain, heated by the same tropical sun and sheltered under the same stars. They were deeply aware of their interdependence with the entire community of creation and that life was only possible when lived harmoniously and in relationship with each other, with nature, and with the life-giving God. They arguably opted to belong instead of dominating because they knew that they were not owners of the *aluora* nor of the other living creatures. This state of belonging and loving relationships became the primary basis for Luo people's spirituality and related moral traditions of communal

life and it has been a consistent quest for Luo people until recently.

This spirituality was expressed in every aspect of life including naming, rites, farming and harvesting ceremonies. For example, a child born during the rainy season would be named *okoth* and others were named after animals, birds, and ecological circumstances. Also, people were not allowed to abuse their *aluora*, to cut trees that bear fruits. Instead every member of the community has the responsibility to care for it; with gestures, pouring water on it and saying good words on it.

At every ceremony be it harvest, childbirth, passage of rite or victory over tragedy, the Luo people thank God for the life, thank the Mother Earth for the fruit, and celebrate the fertility of women in recognition that everything is interconnected and interdependent. From the beginning, Luo people were connected with their *aluora* and with divine presence. They knew that their survival depended on those ecological relationships and economy.

Then, something happened which broke this fragile ecological consciousness. Portuguese caravels arrived with swords, Bibles and greed. This and later colonialism brought about the separation and exploitation of people and nature. Gradually, the cycles of the sun and moon were replaced by the rhythms of consumption, trade and civilization. Indigenous concepts of 'common good' and 'good enough' were replaced by indiscriminate exploitation, individualism and unlimited ambition. A Eurocentric and abstract understanding of being, knowing and believing was imposed, replacing *aluora*.

Understanding that the current ecological crisis is the result of greed, disorder and disconnected relationships points us to a solution that focuses on healing our wounded morality and spirituality. The reconstruction of collective morality and spirituality is such a profound issue and there are no shortcuts to remedy it.

Cultural ecology is not a popular practice within many modern and postmodern societies. Often it is relegated to sentiments of 'salvage' activism, but the dynamics of hope and victory that cultural ecology contributed in pre-colonial Africa can be revived. The first step to this healing is recognizing and naming the damage that human creatures under colonial civilization have made to their life-giving environments.

The second step is rediscovering and embracing wisdom traditions in the Bible and in Christian traditions. Learning how to read the pains of the beasts, the birds of the heaven, the bushes of the earth, the fish of the sea in respectful silence (Job 12:7-10) and knowing the wheat seed of our time that needs to die in order to come to life and bring fruit (John 12:24) must be reimagined.

The third step relates to rediscovering our culturally informed ecological spirituality and practice.

Aluora is the space to take responsibility for the damage that our ego has played in that destruction of our own aluora. It is where we can once again move from 'I' to 'We'.

It is reclaiming our collective spirituality and moral traditions of equitable survival and sustainability. *Aluora* calls for every person to move beyond individual attitudes, behaviours and life choices that contribute to kill the *aluora* we live in.

To Luo people, spirituality is divine and is taken to be an ultimate source of Life. Spirituality is not abstract, but immanent and concrete. People don't create spirituality but discover it. It is connected to people's livelihoods and lifeways by rules, regulations, structures and institutions based on a framework of ethical and spiritual knowledge about the requirement for sustainable relationships with nature. There is much to be learnt from rural Luo communities where people quite literally live off nature. Their knowledge of the world and their sense of reality are intrinsically shaped by how they interact with the natural environment of their society both physically and spiritually.

Finally, our wounded spirituality of the *aluora* needs to be healed, and this healing process requires intentionality in seeing, feeling, repenting, and changing drastically. If our abstract ecological ideologies have created an imbalanced relationship with the rest of non-human community with whom we share our *aluora*, then embracing wisdom traditions and moral traditions of abundant life are the necessary steps towards restoring the lost ecological balance and healing our wounded Luo cultural spirituality.

This article was written as a response to the book *Words for a Dying World* by Hannah Malcolm which includes a range of voices from the Global South speaking authentically from their own context and culture.

It is also linked to the Hook Lecture 2021 given by Carmody Grey titled, 'What do we want to sustain? Thinking about faith and climate'. In her lecture, Carmody identified that people in Leeds (and the Western world

more widely) need to care enough about the people most affected by climate change to act with sufficient intent to make a difference. This article seeks to connect hearts and minds, and build bridges of understanding to enhance our commitment to the global common good.

Watch the Hook Lecture 2021 on YouTube
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIEQeG3IRM4>





DO WE NEED TO BE MORE TOLERANT OR MORE HOSPITABLE IN LEEDS?

A TIME FOR MORE THAN TOLERANCE

We may be coming to the end of our pandemic period as it evolves into endemic living. Or to put it another way, we have been isolated by covid and now we will learn to live with it. This time has meant the complete reordering of our personal lives and our work patterns. It has also caused fundamental changes in the rhythms of our organisations whether churches, mosques, synagogues, schools, hospitals or technology businesses.

As we readjust, refresh and recover, values and virtues can be crucial guides. We may be motivated by justice, loyalty or compassion. Yet, it appears that

Graham Brownlee, Community Organiser with Leeds Citizens, shares his energising vision for purposeful hospitality as a way of refreshing and reconnecting communities.

hospitality will come to the fore, more than toleration has done before. The reason for this is touched upon by Luke Bretherton

“Toleration presumes a common life is already in existence, hospitality does not, seeking as it does to generate one between strangers.”

Toleration is grounded in a stable context in which we are clear on our place as we navigate living in a diverse world. It is a committed forbearance to live and let live. However, things are not settled and so toleration just won't cut it. Patience is in short supply.

Hospitality however starts building interconnected relationships from scratch. It doesn't rely so much on an accepted norm. Hospitality has a dynamic of new possibilities coming from encounter, which toleration lacks.

I have found that toleration is a strong and present virtue in our organisations and communities. But it can be a fixed resource in the sense that people may have already decided what they will tolerate and what they will not. They have also already drawn lines for who is doing the tolerating and who, or what, is to be tolerated. As a result, navigating new circumstances can be uninviting for the organisation and pressured for the leaders.

Hospitality, however, can engender resilience and flexibility in our organisations which helps us reach new horizons and involve new people.

In this reflection I am thinking of two contexts. The first one is of a local group, perhaps a church, school, business or charity. And then asking how hospitality can help us find rhythm, direction and confidence within our group. My second context is that of inter-relations between organisations of whatever sort. I shall revisit these both later.

A HOSPITABLE WAY

From our Christian identity our sense of hospitality comes primarily from Christ who comes among us as stranger and as guest to be welcomed. He comes in turbulent times and shares encounters that reach across barriers with necessary vulnerability and potential.

This is told in John 1 and Philippians 2. Then Christ urges us to share hospitality in loving our neighbours who will so often begin as strangers. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a story of the risky, surprising and disturbing hospitality.

In these ways, hospitality is much more fundamental than inviting for tea, sharing a meal or throwing a party, although it may involve all these. Hospitality means the host and guest meeting in a way in which there is mutual encounter and as relationship builds

there is a blurring and mixing of these roles. The dynamic of existing relationships will alter as we come nearer together. The theologian Karl Barth, reflecting on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, talks about strangers being conceived as distant neighbours.

In hospitality we are always on the way from distant neighbours to near neighbours.

This mutuality presupposes that as different people come together there is equity rather than simply equality. By that I mean that if an encounter is hospitable each group or individual is given what they need to participate fully. This may vary person by person, group by group. All are not given the same; but all are given what is needed for the same level of access and agency.

Secondly, hospitality is primarily sharing ourselves, our hopes, aspirations and anxieties rather than sharing stuff or only entertaining. In this way hospitality forms accountable relationships and is not limited to giving aid or comfort. To borrow the concept of Sam Wells, hospitality is being with rather than being for.

Thirdly, hospitality is open-ended. We do not police or control its outcomes. This is the potential of hospitality but also its risk. So, in hospitable encounters we may celebrate growing collaboration or we may challenge inappropriate behaviour. Likewise, we may discover joy and appreciation with others, or we may be exposed to the distress and injustice faced by others that were previously hidden from us.

In society today toleration is no longer enough to sustain us, it is simply an insufficient virtue in the face of the challenges of coming to terms with racism in our culture (past and present), tribalism in our politics, urgency in facing our climate crisis. We need more than forbearance; we require new courage and possibilities.

We may come to a realisation that we need a new way of hospitality through crisis or by seeing how we have missed opportunities before. A kind of Goldilocks and the Three Bears moment. After their night visitor, the bears exclaimed, "Who's been eating my porridge?" Admittedly the bears didn't choose to have a guest, but their response is a testament to intolerance and missing hospitality. Let us see what

might be possible. You may apply these reflections to a number of contexts, but I return to the two I suggested.

A LOCAL ORGANISATION IN A POST-PANDEMIC TIME

We should not belittle the crisis we have been through. Our capacity may have changed, our priorities altered, our sense of what is possible shifted. We may see this as a time to tackle urgent challenges, a moment to practise being a community more simply. We may have found new relationships even as we have lost many others. Some people may be exhausted, others wishing to lay down roles, with others wishing to do things differently.

With so much disturbance, hospitality offers ways of listening, opening new awareness, enabling those who were guests to become hosts and vice versa. It affords a way of relating post pandemic. Indeed, many in our member organisations are already sharing in relational encounters in their daily lives. This may be time to learn more of these and embrace what such connections bring across our communities.

What is required of an organisation is to give space and time for hospitality to grow. When hospitable encounters offer new possibilities, the organisation has the responsibility to nurture it. Or to pose this as a question; when new ways emerge can an organisation be more than tolerant of them but respond to them hospitably?

THE WAY ORGANISATIONS CONNECT TOGETHER

Among Leeds Citizens it is our endeavour to bring organisations together for the common good. We build this as a relational approach, founded on purposeful listening conversations. This sounds like hospitality in action.

However, we can slip into working as a small group of well networked individuals. In person and virtually, we can connect individuals but it is more difficult to gather communities together. Why? This may be because the connected leaders like to be the ones doing it. Or because it has become the habit that way. It could be because the communities are already burdened and don't need more meetings and demands put upon them. Toleration is a resource that is on the surface, easily and more swiftly tapped but less open. Hospitality lies a little deeper and takes more time and intent to release.

The secret is offering ways of connecting organisations that are hospitable in more than just food and drink. Ways that enable new and hitherto marginal groups to become hosts and with new people exercising leadership.

It is also to be ready to connect with the hopes and dissatisfaction that come out in hospitable conversations.

In Leeds Citizens we are finding a hospitable way for doing this. Firstly, in local organisations and in larger networks, we urge people to participate as small teams rather than through one keen individual. This spreads the load, sustains what is done and is of itself more hospitable. Secondly, we are learning to foster local neighbourhood teams rather than ask a church, school or charity to blaze a trail alone. So "Team Beeston" brings together St Andrews Methodist with St. Mary's Anglican Church with the Beeston Festival and other groups beginning to join in. One can already see the mixing of roles, sharing with people rather than acting for others and open-ended experiences are beginning to flourish. These same processes are emerging and growing in Beeston Hill, Holbeck and Meanwood.

Lovely though this sounds we learn that hospitality takes intent and won't be sustained without commitment and care. Nor will organisations keep engaging if it doesn't connect with their own group life, touch their aspirations and address their anxieties. An involved group needs to be blessed and see how they are growing and finding life by connecting with others. We can see this as the enabling movement of the Holy Spirit is at the heart of interconnecting.

PURPOSEFUL HOSPITALITY

This may simply be in praise of hospitality as a process which is an end in itself. But this is to expect too much of hospitality. Whilst hospitable encounters open up new relationships, something needs to happen next. Hospitality needs a purpose beyond itself and a connection to change.

Luke Bretherton mentioned the meal on the Road to Emmaus as a fine example of hospitality where the guest becomes host and the hosts become guests at the table. Then look at what happened next. At end of the meal they didn't pull up a chair, pass round the wine and have a snooze before the fire. Rather, they

got up and returned to Jerusalem from where they had retreated. Now striding with a new story to tell, rediscovered courage and renewed purpose. The encounter generated action.

In many of our groups there is much talk and less action. Words can be insightful and reassuring but they can be as Dennis Jacobsen puts it “safe places to hide.” What society needs as Elvis Presley sung it, “A little less conversation, a little more action, please.... A little more bite and a little less bark”.

A fruitful way is not to remove the deeper conversations but to practise purposeful hospitality. These are the characteristics that should be what we expect and seek from hospitality:

New and deeper open conversation.

New people equipped, welcomed and emboldened to lead.

New actions and direction to see change in the world around us.

It is undoubtedly true that we are now moving from pandemic to endemic times. The time has come for a purposeful hospitality. But let us be prepared for the new priorities and structures which will emerge by interconnecting together in hospitable ways.

Recommended Reading

Karl Barth, G Bromiley and T Torrence (2004) *Church Dogmatics* Vol. III/4 and IV/2 published by T & T Clark

Luke Bretherton (2019) *Christ and the Common Life* published by Eerdmans

Sam Wells (2015) *A Nazareth Manifesto* published by Wiley



WHERE IS THE JOY IN PRESENT DIFFICULTIES? SEEING THE LIGHT OF RESISTANCE IN DARK TIMES.

Dr Helen Reid, Director of Leeds Church Institute, introduces the Seeing Asylum Exhibition

The *Seeing Asylum* photo-story exhibition was hosted by Leeds Church Institute at Holy Trinity Church in the city centre as part of Leeds Lit Fest 2022. It provided an opportunity for people to engage with a powerful visual and vocal representation of womens' experience of asylum both in Immigration Removal Centres and in our communities. I have chosen to share three of the eleven photo-stories which I see as expressing a shared theme of joy as resistance.

For churches and Christians within the African American tradition, 'joy as resistance' speaks to their history of oppression and slavery as well as their current context. Finding joy in a context of struggle is an act of resistance against powers and principalities that enforce injustice and human despair. It is not a feeling like happiness, although it can include good feelings. Importantly too, it is not something that individuals can find for themselves but rather it requires a community to sustain one another in joy in the face of struggle and oppression. It is a celebration of God's goodness and presence.

In this way, joy is not the reward for surviving or overcoming struggle, rather it is intrinsically linked

with all that is difficult in present suffering. It is the constant thread running through troubles that sustains and resources the search for justice and peace. To see this expressed in the images and words below is both inspirational and uncomfortable. The words below were written by Maria De Angelis as commentary on the photo-voice exhibition.

EXPLAINING THE PROCESS BEHIND THE ART

These photo-stories by criminologist Maria De Angelis and photographer Jeremy Abrahams showcase the lived experiences of fifteen asylum seekers living in the city of Leeds. Given that women cannot take photos inside Immigration Removal Centres, the photographs are artistic representations of key lived moments as narrated by women and negotiated between women, critical friends, researcher and photographer. They take you on an experiential tour of lived realities. Art as witness to trauma and resistance encourages all of us to think through oppressive dynamics imposed on people by the state and its institutions, so we are better equipped to understand our place in asylum practices and our capacity for social change.



*'She gave me her wrap.
I still have it.'*

What does the photo-story tell us?

Looking at Centre routines and practices under the micro-lens of lived experience raises the fragility of State exclusion, even when imposed on a heterogeneous collection of non-citizens with diverse ethnic and religious identities. Joli (31) – a Christian from Namibia – recalls languishing in her room until a Kenyan detainee and professed Muslim showed her where to eat and how to use the computer room. Kia (41) – an Anglican from Uganda – describes arriving with nothing but the clothes she is arrested in, to be given a wrap by a Russian Orthodox Christian. The wrap meant so much to Kia, that she could not bring herself to throw it in the IRC cupboard (where many women discard items redolent of their captivity). Inside the walls of the Centre and across such a diverse social group, such small kindness magnifies an administrative indifference for women's ethical care and social belonging.



'They said I wasn't going to be attending chapel anymore.'

What does the photo-story tell us?

A significant strength of photo-story is that it situates detainees as primary experts in the detention regime. This brings into focus the reality that IRCs are more than just human warehouses and their inhabitants possess autonomy and agency. As this photo-narrative shows, in the struggle for survival, women's ingenuity and creativity interrupts (albeit temporarily) the smooth workings of State power and control over people without rights of citizenship or belonging. When it comes to challenging institutional restrictions on women's free association: 'they [the guards] said I wasn't going to be attending chapel anymore because in chapel we had ladies from other wings and when we had made friends – that's when we planned the hunger strike' (Benyo (35) from Zimbabwe – 31 days on hunger strike). The hunger strike not only disrupts the smooth running of the IRC but actively lowers its performance rating vis-à-vis contractual delivery of care.



*'We sing about the
importance of freedom.'*

What does the photo-story tell us?

There is much to be learnt about detention from within and without its walls. Wema (32) from Malawi explains how forming a choir inside detention is a transgressive challenge to restrictions placed on women's free association. 'Every twelve midnight, we'd go into our friend's room because she was a pastor. Staff would knock to say you are making noise. We would say we are not making noise – you are. We can hear your footsteps in the corridor and your bunch of keys rattling. We are praying. But (laughs heartily) we are Pentecostal and when we sing it's very noisy... Guards weren't happy, but they allowed it. They just said we were stubborn people'. On release, Sita (25) from Ivory Coast describes going with her friend to check out her local community choir: 'We sang for international woman day, yeah, all the choir, roughly 15-20 persons. We sing about the importance of freedom and why people need freedom. And love and hope! And, yeah, so it's kind of the freedom of acceptance and belonging – that kind, rather than political freedom, yeah'.

SEEING ASYLUM

To see the full set of eleven photo-stories, please contact LCI to request the booklet *Seeing Asylum* or visit the exhibition in Refugee Week 2-26 June 2022 (venue tbc), jointly sponsored by the Centre for Applied Social Research (CeASR) and Leeds Church Institute.

Recommended reading:

John Swinton (2020) *Finding Jesus in the Storm* SCM Press

IS THERE SUCH A WORD AS EMPOWERER?

Hannah Stone, Leeds Church Institute Poet-Theologian, believes there should be, and that it would perfectly describe John Battle.



John was knighted in the New Year's Honours list in recognition of his public and political service over the last forty years. At the end of last year, LCI published a blog profiling John as a contributor to the 'Power to the People' poetry initiative. This blog has been updated, below, to celebrate John's achievements with and for the people of Leeds.

John's biography is impressive but he is so much more than the sum of his parts. A cradle Catholic he attended junior seminary, but rather than following that through into ordination as a priest, he took a degree in English Literature at the University of Leeds. He then moved into increasing involvement with the Labour Party, standing successfully as an MP for West Leeds between 1987 and 2014. During his time in office, he held several positions of considerable responsibility. But equally telling is how his faith has prompted his involvement in particular organisations and roles, for example as the Prime Minister's special envoy to all faith communities, and as National Co-ordinator for Church Action on Poverty as long ago as 1983. It seems to me that John can always sniff out opportunities to bring together his desire for that Biblical quality of righteousness and social justice in ways that are effective and challenging to the status quo whilst remaining compassionate and accessible.

Although retired from parliamentary office now, John is apparently indefatigable in his efforts to engage with so-called 'ordinary' people, although it is clear John finds ALL people extraordinary! He actively seeks ways of enriching others' lives through the creative arts and political activism. Yet he does not proselytise, either about his faith or his politics. John is one of those rare people whose entire life bears witness to his social and religious beliefs.

I attended a Poetry and Pizza session at New Wortley Community Centre where John shared examples of poetry focusing on the theme of remembrance and poppies, encouraging members of the group to read and reflect on not only the familiar Siegfried Sassoon's *Everyone Sang* and John McCrae's *In Flanders Fields* but the less familiar *May, 2015* by Charlotte Mew, and Denise Levertov's *Making Peace*. The discussion flowed and it was clear that John, always so interested to listen and respond to others, is a much loved facilitator at the group.

I cannot think of a better exemplar of an empowerer. If there isn't such a word, I am sure he would be the first to seize it and put it to use. Thank you, John, for all you do here in Leeds.

You can read the whole series of *Power to the People Profiles* on www.lcileeds.org

UPCOMING EVENTS FOR 2022

FAITH AND THE ARTS

The Way Up Is Down

This art installation focusses our thoughts on what we have learnt during the pandemic. It is at Left Bank Leeds, Cardigan Road, Leeds on 18th to 21st April from 10am – 5pm

GROWING OLD GRACEFULLY EVENTS SERIES

‘Over the Hill or Embracing the View? – Different perspectives on Later Life

26th April (12 - 2.45pm) at Wheeler Hall, St Anne’s Street, Leeds, LS2 8BE

Celebrating Later Life

This Jubilee tea party is on 16th June (2.30 – 4pm) at Wheeler Hall, St Anne’s Street, Leeds, LS2 8BE

Losses and Later Life - Facing changes and challenges

12th July (10.30 – 12 noon) on Zoom

FAITH AND CITY LIFE:

Seeking the Welfare of the City

Keep an eye out for new podcasts on the Leeds Church Institute YouTube channel produced in association with the William Temple Foundation. These will include episodes from notable figures who are helping to shape the welfare of Leeds. Guests will be talking to Bishop James Jones and reflecting on the challenges of the city and their responses to these.

Seeking Connection? Political and spiritual yearning for values and authenticity in a post-pandemic world

The Annual Hook Lecture 2022 will be given by Revd Prof Chris Baker, William Temple 7:30 pm on 2nd November at Leeds Minster (LS2 7DJ) and live on Facebook

To find out more details and to book visit: www.LCILEeds.org | @LCILEeds



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