

## Understanding and Studying Social Transformation in Africa

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*“Significant problems of today cannot be solved with the same level of thinking which created them.”* Albert Einstein

*“Those that can change themselves and can lead change and transformation will be rewarded beyond imagination.”* Sullivan Roland

**Abstract:** Interest about Social Transformation is on the increase in academic circles, but also among practitioners of human development, policy making, health and other disciplines. This paper wishes to offer a bird eye view of the birth and development of the notion of Social Transformation. It also tackles the issue of religion as a factor in this process. Particular attention is given to the Social Teaching of the church as evidence of religious bodies’ attention to critique from social sciences. A section on methodological considerations suggests that the study of Social Transformation should be empirical but also conceptual. This paper is an attempt at conceptualising Social Transformation with particular attention to the African context.

**Key words:** Social Transformation, Social Teaching of the (Catholic) church, liberation, religion.

### Introduction

In recent decades, interest in the study of Social Transformation (ST) as an academic discipline is on the increase. This is evidenced by the mushrooming literature that includes textbooks (for instance, Sanderson, 1999) and journals, as well as by the introduction of academic degrees in the subject area of ST or social change. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *Review of Law & Social Change*, *Social Change* are some of the top journals in the field. In his ambitious work, Sanderson (1999) suggests that the concept of “Social Transformation” provides a theoretical framework for the interpretation of the evolutionary process of world history. Earlier, in 1994, UNESCO had launched the Management of Social Transformation (MOST) Programme aimed at fostering social science research in order to provide evidence that will inform policy making. This adds another dimension to the understanding of the scope of ST as an academic discipline.

Similar development within the African continent, though slow in pace, is now catching up. ST is a much-featured topic in South African academic discourse of political science and social work (Agbiji & Swart, 2015; Reddy, 2004). Tangaza University College in Nairobi is one of the first institutions in Africa to introduce postgraduate studies in ST, with

Masters and PhD degrees in the subject. The launching of the journal of which this article forms part is a sign of the degree of currency which the discourse on ST in Africa has gained.

But what is ST? How does it relate to religion? Does it have any specific content in the African context? These are questions that still remain points for discussion. Therefore, the objective of the present article is to delve into these questions in order to provide a framework for the study of ST as an academic discipline. The article has the following sections:

The first section attempts to define ST, in terms of the process, agents, and outcomes of an epoch change in society. It discusses in detail the dynamics of interaction between these sub-dimensions of change.

The section that follows deals with history. This section provides a brief presentation of the reasons why attention to ST has grown exponentially, particularly during the decades of transitioning from the second to the third millennium.

The third section deals with ST in Africa, particularly covering the last seven decades since the Second World War. This period in African history was marked by political independence from European colonialism, which was immediately replaced by the American and Russian 'neo-colonialism' of the Cold War. Emphasis will be given to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, marking an end to the possibilities of the attempt to introduce communism in any substantive form in the African continent.

The fourth section discusses whether religion should be considered a negative or a positive factor of change and transformation, taking into account the cynical remark by Marx (1877): "Religion is the opiate of the masses." This much-celebrated statement was for several decades often uncritically accepted by many, hence it was taken for granted that religion is at the service of the status quo preventing the attempts at ST. Yet, as this article argues, inspired by Marx, religions, particularly Christianity, have over the last 50 years or so prompted many positive revolutions (Waliggo, 1994) and they have also changed their methodology. A tangible outcome of this is the Social Teaching of the Church (Coleman & Ryan, 2005) and an attitude powerfully synthesized for the first time by an Ecumenical Council in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965).

The fifth and final section of the article offers some methodological considerations. It suggests that the study of ST should be empirical but also conceptual. The empirical approach provides evidence-based evaluations of situations and interventions related to ST – either testing hypotheses by means of quantitative data or exploring experiences and perceptions of individuals using qualitative data. Conceptual approaches, on the other hand, philosophise on the empirical data so as to evaluate existing social theories and to generate hypotheses that can be tested by employing empirical methods.

The article concludes by reflecting on the signs of the present time. We are cruising through a liminal time in history, marked by an accelerating speed of social change, particularly in Africa, a feeling of: we are no more here and not yet there. This leaves us in a state of anxiety and of hope at the same time. These times call for greater attention in academic circles to the dynamics of ST. In brief, the present article is an attempt at conceptualising ST, particularly in the African context in order to provide a pivotal structure for academic discourse. We do this mostly by considering the historical background to social change, focusing on religion especially in the African context. We begin by defining ST.

### **Towards a Definition of ST**

Akman (2008) argues that 'social transformation' is an ambiguous term and concept. Therefore, right at the outset, there is a need to discuss the terminology. Often, ST is simply identified with development (Castles, 2001). While they are related terms, ST and

development cannot be considered univocal: ST can be considered as broader than 'development', particularly in cases where the latter term is meant to refer only to economic growth.

For the purposes of this paper, we understand ST as *a set of processes in which individuals and groups of people bring about large scale social change with an aim of enhancing quality of life*. In this sense, ST is more than development (Castles, 2001). There are several constructs in the above definition that need further elaboration. We clarify them briefly.

First, ST refers to social *processes*, particularly those that bring about noteworthy changes. These processes could be political, economic, social, or religious. Transformation here presupposes a change with a positive value, always implying a forward thrusting movement towards the enhancement of quality of life. Hence, while ST should refer to positive upward or forward thrusting processes, 'social change' could refer to both negative and positive processes. On the other hand, the sociological term, 'social mobility' simply refers to movement of individuals and groups in their social status, particularly in terms of class or caste hierarchy within the layers of stratification of society.

Secondly, the study of ST includes **agents** of social processes. These include individual actors (such as social activists, thinkers, writers and entrepreneurs) and institutions (governments, religions, religious organisations and academic institutions). Often the agents of ST are traced only *post-hoc* following an 'epoch transformation' (Castles, 2001).

Thirdly, the expected outcome of ST is **quality of life** (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993) which is understood as the wellbeing of individuals and groups in a given society. Indicators of quality of life include not only economic growth but also systems such as education, healthcare, political structure, environmental care and leisure activities that safeguard the "capabilities" (Nussbaum, 2003) for the functioning of all members of a given society or a nation in order to enjoy wellbeing. In psychological terms, wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2008) is construed and measured in terms of subjective wellbeing that includes life satisfaction (Diener, 1984), psychological wellbeing (Ryff and Keyes, 1995), and social wellbeing (Larson, 1993).

### Historical Reasons for Increased Attention to ST

Having tentatively defined ST, we now go on to list some key events and processes that have contributed to the emergence of ST as a subject of scientific enquiry within academia. The aim of this section is not to lay down an exhaustive chronicle of major transformations, but to highlight reasons for the exponential increase in attention to ST.

**A new vision of the origin of the universe.** It is the first time in history that humans have a clear picture of their own history, which, as existing evidence suggests, started emerging from a singularity – a unique event, which occurred 13.7 billions of years ago. This event is referred to as The Big Bang.<sup>1</sup> Many details are still obscure, but science is in a position to identify the different phases of the process leading from that original moment to the present universe. Until less than a century ago, humans believed that the history of the world started some thirty to fifty thousand years ago. Right now we generally take for granted that the universe is billions of years old. For the first time humans have a clear perception that transformations, changes, evolutions, leaps and turns are found at the heart of what we usually call creation, cosmos, or universe. Moreover, we know that the universe is expanding at an increasing speed; in other words, we will never be in a position to design the final map

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<sup>1</sup> The expression was coined by George Lemaitre (1894 – 1966), a Catholic Belgian priest-astronomer, who is also the first scientist to propose the theory of the expanding universe.

of the universe. Science assures us that every second, as it were, some stars die and others are born. Death and birth suggest transformation.

**Radical change in the scientific paradigm.** For the larger part of the scientific revolution since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the Newtonian mechanistic worldview has dominated the enquiry in the physical sciences. However, since Einstein's Theory of Relativity and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, a system's worldview has emerged (Capra, 2010). This is a major paradigm shift in the history of science, as Kuhn (2012) would call it. This shift has had an impact on social sciences in terms of the transition from positivism to social constructivism, from modernism to post-modernism, from the exaggeration of the role of grand theories to being satisfied with middle-range theories (Merton, 1957).

**Technological advancement.** One of the positive outcomes of the mechanistic world-view is technological advancement. Since the time of Galileo and Newton, science has progressed greatly, with technological advancement in its wake. When scientific models and principles have been translated into practical devices they have given rise to technological inventions, all aimed at enhancing human life. The industrial revolution and the advent of information technology are epochal events that changed humanity. They have improved medical care, prolonged longevity and enhanced quality of life. These technological changes have also affected the physical environment and the human cultural milieu. A scholar of ST cannot neglect these realities.

**Emergence of ecological awareness.** The new ecological sensitivity has been generated due to the evidence that human activity has had some irreversible impact on the state of the environment (Goudie, 1990). Even if this impact would have been a result of a long history of human activity, the industrial revolution has accelerated this impact, triggering an alarm in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Human beings realise that we are in this little ship – earth – sailing along a forlorn orbit in a massive universe, and we do not care if this planet and therefore our own existence as a species is at stake. This calls for an “ecological conversion,” as Pope Francis (2015) labelled it. This also requires a need for a strong awareness of interdependence – between peoples of various nations, and between ourselves and the rest of planet earth. If the Amazon forest becomes a desert, the effects will be felt far beyond the boundaries of Brazil. The whole planet earth will be depleted of oxygen; the ratio of carbon-dioxide will reach lethal levels worldwide. Interdependence means that nobody is isolated from good or evil. In other words, solidarity is no longer just an ethical option; it is becoming a necessity imposed on us by historical evolutions and transformations.

**Changes in cultures.** What we see in the world today is the emergence of a global culture. Certain dominant cultures are usurping smaller ones. For instance, take the dynamics of culture related to food: people are changing their nutritional habits. The same is true for the aspect of relationships between people of different age groups within a family or society: relationships are getting flattened. This also may be said of gender roles and identities. Even specificities of ethnic groups are downplayed today. It is not a surprise that these expressions of ST have attracted attention in academics circles.

**Changes in political structures.** There has also been shift in the political realm, from local to global, from centralized power to devolved structures. In the early centuries of known human history, governance was generally very local, often confined to tribal kinship structures. After that we had the development of city-states, and subsequently the creation of

large empires through conquests, such as the Persian and Roman empires. These could be seen as predecessors to the current globalisation (Harari, 2011). However, the political structures that we have today are marked by an apparent paradox. On the one hand, we have the almost 200 nations forming an umbrella structure under the United Nations and consisting of numerous economic blocs and political alliances. There are global financial structures such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and global legal structures such as the International Criminal Court. On the other hand, there is also an attempt at devolution of local governance aimed at improved delivery of services to the masses. There are attempts at preserving the identities of ethnic minorities, and laying territorial claims to ancestral homelands, sometimes leading to violent conflicts. These paradoxes provide hot topics for academic exercises.

**Change in perception about religions.** The traditional view of religion, across religious traditions, was that religion preserved a certain body of revelation that was handed down by God as a complete product to someone in a unique way. Often there were some divine characteristics attributed to this person. Nowadays, there is an awareness that not all dimensions of religion are revealed products (Capra & Steindl-Rast, 1991). Divine intervention is not totally lost from religion. However, there is a greater acknowledgement among believers of most religions, particularly scholars, that a large part of religion may be a result of human elaboration, historical additions, and regional cultural interpretations by the founder of a given religion. In this context, religions are perceived to be not only agents of ST, as we will elaborate shortly, but also as targets of transformation imposed by society.

As said earlier, this section was not meant to be an exhaustive chronological treatment of all the forces and processes of ST. We have just highlighted certain salient features of the *zeitgeist* of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries that have prompted an academic interest in ST—on the global scene. Next we focus our attention on processes of transformation within Africa.

### **Milestones Marking Social Transformation in Africa**

Africa has been often on the receiving end of the epochal events described above. Some events, such as the age of global explorations and subsequent colonialism have been left out in the previous section because they are more relevant for treatment in the context of Africa. Again, we only highlight some outstanding processes and products of social change of from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards in African society and church.

**The end of colonialism.** The decades of the 1960s and 1970s saw the independence of the majority of African states. This meant new national borders, new constitutions, and new political leaders. This looked initially very romantic, but eventually became an uphill task. Traditions of self-rule and governance had to be established through trial and error (Parker & Rathbone, 2007, pp. 91-134). Some states have still not managed to find their grounding. Pope John XXIII (1963, para 38) was very optimistic about the events of the 1960s; he referred to the increase of independent states as a sign of the times; an event willed, designed and planned by God with great positive consequences.

**African Subjectivity.** Independence brought about the growth of African subjectivity and consciousness. Formerly, Africa was an appendix to Europe, now Africa acquired its own continental identity and organization as envisaged by the founding fathers, such as Nkrumah,

Kenyatta, Nyerere, and Kaunda. The formation of the African Union was thus an expression of African subjectivity. African subjectivity took on another concrete expression in 1989, after the end of the cold war, a time that was marked by the rise of civil society in Africa (Pierli, 2009, pp. 95-108). Civil societies have been at the heart of increased democratic processes in some African nations. Worth mentioning among the milestones in the emergence of African subjectivity is also the election of the first black president in South Africa in 1994. This marked the apex of independence from the colonial regimes for the whole continent. Current experience of African subjectivity is observed, at economic and social levels, in the rise of a class of local social entrepreneurs (Mukura, 2008).

**Devolution.** Devolution has been the key word in governance over the past 20 years or more (Ghai & Ghai, 2011). Devolution basically means that people at the periphery count. Let us consider the example of Kenya, during the colonial and the post-colonial time. Right up to 1989, there was a bi-polar world, the style of governance was centralized in the hands of the president, everything else was centralized in the capital town Nairobi and at State House; the physical buildings of Parliament were symbols of a governance system which was not yet operational. African subjectivity could not emerge with such centralized systems of governance. The possibility of having real African subjectivity is devolution and this is what happened with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Constitution in Kenya since 2010. With 47 counties, the people of various areas in different counties have a strong say about local problems. They are able to do research and analysis on these problems and provide solutions. Devolution therefore, is a significant component in our attempt to understand STs in Africa.

**From mission-centred churches to missionary churches.** The transitions in the larger society were also accompanied by a parallel development within the Church. Even by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most of African Christianity, and more particularly the Catholic Church, was a mission-centred church. "Mission" was understood as being a service provider of education, healthcare, and other services (often managed by foreign missionaries) and people went to the missions to be helped to meet their basic needs. Over the last 50 years, there has been a tremendous movement towards localization of the church (Baur, 1998). The missionaries began to disappear, mission-centred churches diminished, and we now have mostly localised churches. And this is part of the ongoing subjectivity of Africa. The two African synods with the documents that followed, *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995) and *Africae Munus* (2010), contributed to African subjectivity. Today, the African church reaches out to the people on the streets through their 'Small Christian communities'. And more significantly, African clergy are going out of the continent as missionaries.

**Theology and theologians of the young churches: EATWOT.** The second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century also witnessed attempts at contextualised theologies. The culmination of these attempts was the formation of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in 1976 (Cone, 1991; Fabella & Sugirtharajah, 2003). Theologians belonging to EATWOT formally proposed a different way of reflecting on faith, one that is contextual. More importantly, this was an ecumenical initiative. African theologians followed suit, they met in Dar es Salaam and stated that the way of doing theology in Europe should not be accepted by the young churches. Right up to that time in Europe theology was just an explanation of the Creed, the official profession of faith. It tended to be very catechetical, being simply an aid to faith for both the priest and the lay people. The theologians of the young churches advocated local theologies, theological reflections on human conditions of life. They sought to identify the negative conditions which prevent the coming of the kingdom of God, such as immense poverty, fragile peace, inequitable distribution of natural

and-economic resources. The aim of theology was seen as analysing these realities in the light of faith and then to suggest the adoption of the spiritual and ethical values as building blocks for ST. In this way theology could serve as a strong component in the process of improving the quality of life in Africa. Local theologians should not only pay attention to the social teaching of the Church, but should positively contribute to its development as a major factor towards the inculturation of faith.

In summary, the global processes that have led to the study of ST have had their parallels within the African continent. In Africa, these processes have included socio-political events as well as religious situations as enumerated above. Having listed the events related to ST, we proceed in the next section to the discussion of the precise role of religion and Christianity in ST.

### **The Role of Religion and Christianity in ST**

“Religion constitutes an inextricable part of African society”, and religion is a major player in the process of ST, particularly in Africa (Agbiji & Swart, 2015). A similar case could be made for most of the world (Giddens, 2009, pp. 673-720). Therefore, in this section we discuss the relationship between religion and ST, again pointing to watershed events that have influenced the relationship. We focus particularly on the role of Catholic Church in ST.

**The Bible: God’s transforming power in history.** The approach to the sacred books, particularly to the Bible, has changed dramatically within the Catholic tradition over the last 50 years. In the new approach stronger attention is paid to the social and cultural contexts of the writers, as well as the faith communities for whom the books were intended. Previously the books were believed to have descended from heaven, practically as having been personally written by God. In this context, the attention to the human author was almost negligible. This vision is now gradually being phased out. This new understanding is a paramount factor in preventing the sacred books from being used as a support for violent fundamentalism. What is transformative is the divine message and not the cultural ingredients (Fiorenza, 1998).

**Mounting attention to the historical Jesus.** The interest on the historical Jesus that reached its climax in the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed to a new understanding of Jesus; it has facilitated the role of Christianity in ST (Lohfink, 2012; Nolan, 1978; Pagola, 2013). What we are now rediscovering is that he was a transformer in his own religious and social context and an unbelievable transformer at that. He saw himself in line with the prophetic movement in the Hebrew Scriptures, as is evident from the way he introduced himself in the Synagogue of Nazareth, quoting as he did Isaiah 51. However, he was also an agent of transformation in the relationship he had with women, with the temple of Jerusalem and with the political authorities. He was a transformer in all spheres of life!

**The Prophetic dimension of Christianity.** Flowing from the above, we see Jesus identifying himself as a prophet and not as a priest, not as a person of structure but as a charismatic transformer. This understanding of his identity by Jesus had an impact on the understanding of the church. In the Letter to the Ephesians, St Paul refers to the church as being built on the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20). During the 2000-year long history of the church, the emphasis has been very much on the apostles, suggesting a hierarchical approach in to church governance (Gaillardetz, 2008), but at present we are discovering more and more

the prophetic dimension. This dimension has somehow been side-lined by the successors of the apostles, the reason being that, as Jesus said, prophets are never accepted in their own country or in their own churches because they shake the foundations.

**Charisms and charismatic persons.** Prophecy is related to charism. There have always been charismatic people in religions. As Weber (1968) has elaborately discussed, there is always a tension between charismatic individuals and the institutional structures of society and religion (see also, Adair-Toteff, 2015). The history of religious life in Christianity is marked by the daring initiatives of founders of religious orders, such as the Benedictines, Franciscans, Jesuits, Salesians, Combonis. All their founders were charismatic people in their interpretation of the style of living the Christian life and of different ministries in the Church. Due to developments in society and church, these ministries today have a very clear social dimension (Bruni & Smerilli, 2009; Ghezzi, 2007). Right up to the last 50 years, the social dimension of charism had not been directly elaborated at least theologically. Nowadays there is greater attention to the social dimension of charisms (Bruni & Smerilli, 2009; Ghezzi, 2007); it is argued that these founders were actually social transformers.

**Marx's critique of religion – from charity to reflection.** The ST initiated by the founders of religious orders prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century was aimed at charity. However, since the event of Karl Marx the charity-intervention has taken another dimension. Marx, one of the founding fathers of sociology (Giddens, 2009, pp. 673-720), perceived religion and culture – “suprastructure” – as being manipulated by politics and economics – “infrastructure” of society. He saw religion often being at the service of the status quo that made Marx affirm that “*Religion is the opiate of the masses.*” This statement could be supported by having recourse to several aspects of history, including the role of religion in the conservation of the class system. Marx's own approach was to side-line religion in bringing about ST through communism, as he envisioned it.

**The Church as a social actor.** What was the impact of this statement of Marx on religions? The statement may have contributed to the opening of the eyes of religions. Tangible evidence for this is available in the changed outlook within the Catholic tradition of Christianity. The social teaching of the Church, together with the series of Papal encyclicals starting with *Rerum Novarum* (1891), may provide such evidence. The Marxian critique of religion may have served as a goad for Christianity to become a leaven of ST in the world. It came to see that charitable intervention to alleviate unjust structures – such as poverty in which it was always involved through the religious orders – were not enough. The church needed to start using methods of social analysis to ask why those unjust structures persisted.

The study of ST, which is the subject of the present article, needs to take into consideration the Marxian methodology of social analysis. The empirical approaches in research provide data for social analysis. This is the focus of the next subsection.

## Methods of Studying ST

In a large sense, the study of ST can be carried out as a conceptual exercise and as empirical research. Conceptual studies are basically literature based. Conceptual research in ST focuses on a concept or a theory that explains or describes a social phenomenon. If the theory is sound, then the explanation offered by the theory regarding the phenomenon will also be sound. In other words, in a conceptual study, premises are built on the basis of available data or theories, and the conclusion follows logically from the premises. The



conclusion is likely to provide new and reliable knowledge. The conceptual approach often generates social theories. On other occasions, conceptual papers may generate hypotheses that need to be empirically verified.

Empirical research provides evidence-based evaluations of situations and interventions related to ST – either by testing hypotheses by means of quantitative data or by exploring experiences and perceptions of individuals using qualitative data. Participatory methods of research such as ‘action research’ are privileged methods of understanding these social processes (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), in contrast to third person approaches which are largely based on measurements. Also because positivist methods presuppose the role of power exerted in terms of academic expertise and statistical data. Participatory methods involve the community as protagonists in research rather than being targets of the study, and hence they are transformative in themselves.

How do empirical methods fit into the method of pastoral cycle, which is a standard Christian method of reflecting on social processes in the light of the Gospel (Henriot, 2005)? In simple terms, the pastoral cycle is based on the see-judge-act method of the Young Christian Workers (YCW), a movement founded by Joseph Cardijn in 1912. The pastoral cycle when applied to a scientific study could consist of four steps: Experience or Insertion, Social Analysis, Theological Reflection, and Action. The empirical data and analysis of the data will contribute to the social analysis dimension of the pastoral cycle. In other words, empirical data helps us *see* the social situation in a reliable manner. Whereas theological reflection will entail some conceptual approach. Hence, the pastoral cycle method is not divorced from the empirical approach of the social scientists. In fact, it relies on the integration of empirical and conceptual approaches.

## Conclusion

This article aims at providing a framework for understanding and studying ST. After a tentative definition of ST we have enumerated historical milestones that prompted the interest on ST in the world. In a similar vein, watershed events that have contributed to ST in the African context have been considered. Religions have also played an important role in the process of ST at the global level, especially in Africa. We focused particularly on the role of the Catholic church in ST. Finally, we have made a few cursory remarks on the methodology of studying ST.

In conclusion, we may state that we are living through a liminal period in human history. Social realities are in a situation of accelerated change. This situation may leave us in a state of neither this nor the other: the liminal state. Such a situation calls for a more focused scientific study of the agents, processes, and outcomes of ST. It also calls for a scientific look at ST as an academic discipline. We hope that this article will provide a framework for such a scientific study, especially in Africa.

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