African Responses to Colonial Theological Constructs: A Historical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Colonialism in Africa was not only a political and economic project; it was also a theological one. Missionary Christianity, which expanded alongside imperial rule, frequently described African religions as superstition, African cultures as obstacles to salvation, and African converts as perpetual pupils of a European church. This article is a structured documentary analysis of a purposive corpus: four core texts by Allan Boesak, Desmond Tutu, Jean-Marc Ela and Kwame Bediako; a pre-independence comparison corpus; and two colonial-era sources, all read against the secondary historiography of mission. Drawing on the sociology of knowledge and postcolonial theory, it identifies five recurring colonial theological constructs and maps African responses to them in three overlapping streams: Ethiopianism and the African Initiated Churches; liberation and Black theology; and inculturation theology, with African women's theology as a critique running through both. The analysis suggests that the shift from reactive protest to constructive self-definition is better understood as a change of emphasis and institutional site than as a linear replacement: constructive self-definition was already being enacted in the early independent churches, while protest persisted in later liberation writing, especially under apartheid. The article argues that these responses remain relevant to debates on identity, justice and theological education, and closes with specific implications for curricula, church practice and institutional reform.

Keywords: Colonial theology; Liberation theology; Inculturation; Postcolonialism; African Christianity; Ethiopianism; African women's theology; Decolonisation

INTRODUCTION

There were two fronts of colonisation: the territorial and the imaginary. These two terms require definition at the outset, because the perspective of the whole article depends on them. Territorial colonisation refers to the physical dimension of empire: the conquest, occupation, and administration of African land, labour, and political institutions by European powers. Imaginary colonisation refers to the conquest of the mind: the imposition of the colonizer's categories of knowledge, value, and religion, such that the colonised were taught to see themselves, their cultures, and their gods through European eyes (Said, 1978; Mudimbe, 1988). While the territorial front was formally dismantled with political independence (in South Africa, with the end of apartheid in 1994), the imaginary front, of which colonial theology was a central component, has proved far more durable, and it is this second front that the present study investigates.

The missionary encounter has been documented in considerable detail by historians, among them Adrian Hastings (1994) on the church in Africa, Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed (2000) in their continental history of African Christianity, and Jean and John Comaroff (1991) on Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa. The theological content of colonial Christianity, and the African responses to it as a connected sequence, have received less systematic attention. Yet the two fronts were deeply intertwined. The mission station and the colonial administration often went hand in hand, shared staff and facilities, and

bolstered each other's claims to authority. Missionary Christianity provided colonialism with a moral language, the 'civilising mission' and the redemption of the 'Dark Continent', and colonial power provided the missions with protection, land, and captive populations of potential converts (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991; Hastings, 1994).

This institutional interdependence had theological implications that performed definite ideological functions. Because the mission church's material standing (its land, legal protection, funding, and access to converts) depended on the colonial order, its teaching tended, whether consciously or not, to reproduce and legitimate that order. Out of this interdependence grew a recurring set of constructs, examined in Section 4: the fusion of gospel and civilising mission; African religions viewed as superstition rather than religion, and ancestors as demons rather than kin; African churches treated as junior appendages of a church whose centre remained in Europe; a privatised and other-worldly salvation; and mission discourse that redefined women's roles. Each construct did specific ideological work: together they converted conquest into charity, dispossession into tutelage, and racial hierarchy into church order. The result, as African theologians would later argue, was a profound spiritual alienation: to become Christian seemed to involve becoming non-African (Bediako, 1995).

African responses were neither uniform nor passive. African Christians created a rich and internally diverse body of critique and construction: from the Ethiopianist secessions of the late nineteenth century, through the anti-apartheid Black theology of Allan Boesak (1984) and Desmond Tutu (1999), to the liberationist sociology of Jean-Marc Ela (1980/1986), the inculturationist scholarship of Kwame Bediako (1992, 2000), and the women's theology associated with Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1995).

This article builds on a body of comparative scholarship that it does not replace. Martey (1993) presents inculturation and liberation as the two paradigms of African theology and argues for their integration; Mugambi (1995) periodises post-independence theology as a move 'from liberation to reconstruction' after the Cold War, a thesis revisited by Gathogo (2021); Parratt (1995) and Maluleke (1997) survey the field and its emerging agendas. These works concentrate on the post-independence period, and they generally begin from theological paradigms rather than from the colonial constructs to which those paradigms respond. The present article differs in three respects. First, it is organised by construct: each African response is read as an answer to a specific colonial claim. Second, it extends the account back to Ethiopianism, the African Initiated Churches and early African writing, in order to test whether the later paradigms are continuous with them. Third, it brings a sociology-of-knowledge frame and the critique of African women theologians into the account. Its originality is accordingly modest: it re-organises and tests an existing narrative rather than proposing an entirely new one.

The problem that this study addresses can now be stated. Although each of these African responses is well documented when taken individually, they are rarely considered together as a single historical process. Integrative arguments exist (Martey, 1993), but a framing of liberation theology and inculturation theology as competing schools persists in much teaching and debate, rather than seeing them as two sides of the same response to a single colonial provocation. As a consequence, the cumulative character of African theological decolonisation, and the common proposal that it moved from reactive protest to constructive self-definition, remains more often asserted than tested. The research question is therefore: to what extent does African theological response to colonial constructs follow a trajectory from reactive protest to constructive self-definition, and where does the evidence qualify that trajectory? Section 3 sets out how the corpus was selected and the status of the sources used.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study pursues five objectives:

- To examine the theological constructs imposed in Africa under colonialism, the social functions they performed, and the regional and denominational variation among them;

- To analyse the forms of African theological critique and resistance that emerged in response, before and after political independence;

- To trace the development of liberation theology, inculturation theology and African women's theology as the major responses;
- To test the proposed trajectory from protest to self-definition against counterexamples and the limits of the available evidence; and
- To evaluate the ongoing relevance of these responses and to draw specific implications for theological education, church practice and institutional reform.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

This article is a structured documentary analysis of a purposive corpus, presented as a historical-sociological synthesis rather than as a narrative survey. No fieldwork or new archival research was carried out. Colonial-era material is represented by a small number of published primary sources, interpreted alongside the secondary historiography of mission, and the African texts were read according to the standard canons of historical criticism: provenance, context, intended audience, and internal consistency.

3.2 Corpus and selection criteria

The corpus has four tiers. **Tier A (core texts, read closely):** Allan Boesak's Black and Reformed (1984); Desmond Tutu's No Future Without Forgiveness (1999); Jean-Marc Ela's African Cry (1980/1986); and Kwame Bediako's Jesus in Africa (2000), read with his Theology and Identity (1992) and Christianity in Africa (1995). **Tier B (pre-independence comparison corpus):** Edward W. Blyden's Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race (1887); J. E. Casely Hayford's Ethiopia Unbound (1911); the collective volume Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent (1956); and, as threshold texts at independence, Idowu (1965) and Mbiti (1969). The Ethiopianist and prophetic movements, whose own documents are scarce, are represented through the secondary accounts of Sundkler and Steed (2000) and Edgar and Sapire (2000), and are flagged as such in the analysis. **Tier C (colonial-side sources):** David Livingstone's Cambridge address (1857; Livingstone, 1858) and the 1857 resolution of the Dutch Reformed Church synod on separate worship, both quoted in Section 4. **Tier D (women's theology):** Oduyoye (1995), Oduyoye and Kanyoro (1992), Kanyoro (2002) and I. A. Phiri (1997).

Texts were selected against five criteria: (1) authorship by African Christians or, in the case of Blyden, by an African-diaspora intellectual who lived and worked in West Africa; (2) explicit engagement with missionary, colonial or apartheid theological claims; (3) influence, judged by uptake in the later literature; (4) spread across regions, denominations and decades; and (5) availability in English or in a published English translation. The fifth criterion is a practical constraint that also produces a bias, discussed in Section 3.5.

3.3 Analytical procedure

Analysis proceeded in four steps. First, colonial theological constructs were identified inductively from the colonial-side sources and the historiography (Section 4). Second, each African text was read for its context, the construct it addresses, its form of response (for example protest, appropriation and inversion, re-translation, or institution-building), and its key supporting passages; these were recorded in a source matrix (Table 1). Third, pre- and post-independence production was compared on four dimensions (site, mode, adversary and understanding of salvation), and a deliberate search was made for counterexamples to each proposed shift (Section 9). Fourth, the results were interpreted through a postcolonial and sociology-of-knowledge frame.

The interpretive frame is postcolonial. Theology is treated as a social discourse entangled in power relations, both a legitimator of power and a source of resistance, following Said's (1978) analysis of the discursive construction of the colonised 'other', Fanon's (1963) analysis of the psychology of colonisation, and Mudimbe's (1988) study of the 'invention' of Africa. The sociological approach rests on the sociology of knowledge: theological concepts are examined within the social context and conflicts of those who produced them. Two further concepts are used: Gramsci's (1971) notion of counter-hegemony, to describe the appropriation of a

dominant discourse by a dominated group, and Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic power, to describe contests over who has the authority to name the sacred, the human and the good.

3.4 Scope and boundaries

Geographically, the study is confined to sub-Saharan Africa, with illustrative cases drawn from southern Africa (South Africa, Malawi, Zambia), West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire) and Central Africa (Cameroon, the Congo). Lusophone Africa, North Africa and the long-established Ethiopian and Coptic churches are outside its scope; the term 'Ethiopianism' here refers to the movement of independent churches inspired by Psalm 68:31, not to the church of Ethiopia. Chronologically, 'pre-independence' refers broadly to the period from about 1880 to 1960, and 'post-independence' to the period from about 1960, with the important qualification that independence came at different times (1975 in the Portuguese colonies, 1980 in Zimbabwe, 1990 in Namibia) and that South Africa is treated as a settler-colonial regime until 1994. Boesak's and Tutu's apartheid-era writing is therefore post-independence by the calendar of the continent but anti-colonial in its situation, a point that matters for the argument of Section 9.

3.5 Limitations

The corpus favours literate, published, elite and largely English-language expression, and it may under-represent the oral, popular and women-led resistance that was historically as important. Hymnody, prophecy and ritual, the main media of the early independent churches, are only partly captured by a review of written sources, and the account of colonial theology rests on a limited set of primary quotations supplemented by secondary historiography, not on archival work. The constructs described in Section 4 are ideal types, useful for analysis but simplifying what varied across missions, regions and periods. Where these silences affect a conclusion, they are indicated in the text instead of being ignored.

Table 1. Source matrix: selected texts, contexts, constructs addressed and forms of response

Text	Context	Colonial construct addressed	Form of response
Boesak (1984), Black and Reformed	South Africa under apartheid; Reformed tradition	Racialised church; theological warrant for apartheid (4.3)	Appropriation and inversion of the Reformed canon; counter-hegemony from within
Tutu (1999), No Future Without Forgiveness	South Africa, transition from apartheid; Truth and Reconciliation Commission	Racialised church; denigration of African moral resources (4.2, 4.3)	Constructive: ubuntu as the basis of restorative justice
Ela (1980/1986), African Cry	Northern Cameroon; neocolonial poverty; Catholic pastoral work	Privatised and spiritualised salvation (4.4)	Protest and re-reading the gospel from below
Bediako (1992, 1995, 2000)	Ghana and Britain; theological scholarship on African Christianity	Civilising mission; demonisation of African religion (4.1, 4.2)	Re-translation; Christological re-reading of ancestors and chiefs
Blyden (1887), Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race	Liberia and Sierra Leone; Caribbean-born author	Civilising mission; denationalising effect of mission Christianity (4.1)	Early written critique; comparative argument

Text	Context	Colonial construct addressed	Form of response
Casely Hayford (1911), Ethiopia Unbound	Gold Coast; cultural nationalism	Devaluation of African culture (4.1, 4.2)	Cultural-nationalist critique
Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent (1956)	Francophone Africa and Paris; late colonial period; Catholic	Europe-centred church (4.3)	Call for African theological expression
Oduyoye (1995), Daughters of Anowa	West Africa and pan-African; the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians	Gender, domesticity and patriarchy (4.5)	Critique from within both streams; cultural hermeneutics
Ethiopianist and prophetic movements (via Sundkler & Steed, 2000; Edgar & Sapire, 2000)	Southern, West and Central Africa, 1890s to 1950s	Ecclesial paternalism; demonisation of African ritual (4.2, 4.3)	Institution-building; prophecy, healing and hymnody

COLONIAL THEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTS IN AFRICA

The constructs described below are ideal types: the recurring tendencies of colonial Christianity, not a description of every mission. Their expression varied by region, denomination and period. British Protestant societies, French and Belgian Catholic missions (the latter closely tied to the colonial state and to commercial concessions) and the Reformed churches of settler South Africa operated in different legal and political settings (Hastings, 1994). There were also dissenters within the missionary movement, such as John Philip of the London Missionary Society, who defended the rights of the Khoikhoi at the Cape, and John William Colenso, Bishop of Natal, who took the part of Zulu leaders against the colonial authorities. Sanneh (1989) further argues that the act of translation carried effects that missionaries did not intend. The constructs are therefore best read as dominant tendencies against which African Christians defined themselves, not as a uniform colonial doctrine.

4.1 The theology of the civilising mission

In general, mission Christianity in the nineteenth century came to Africa with the baggage of ideas shaped by the European Enlightenment and the racial hierarchies of the Atlantic world. It might be summarised as a melding of the Great Commission and the civilising mission: to evangelise Africa was to Europeanise it. Commerce, Christianity, and civilisation, the well-known 'three Cs' associated with David Livingstone, were seen as a package (Hastings, 1994). Livingstone put the package plainly when he told his Cambridge audience that he was going back to Africa 'to try to make an open path for commerce and Christianity'.[1] Conversion was not defined by the declaration of faith alone, but by the acceptance of European clothing, European-style monogamous marriage, reading and writing in mission schools, and wage work, and by the abandonment of indigenous ritual practices (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991).

Sociologically, this construct performed a legitimating function. If Africans were 'in darkness' religiously, then colonial tutelage could be presented as benevolence and not conquest. The theological denigration of African societies helped to turn an act of dispossession into an act of charity, and thus into a moral self-understanding of the colonising powers (Said, 1978).

[1]Livingstone (1858), from his address in the Senate House, Cambridge, 4 December 1857. The slogan was widely repeated in mission publicity; Livingstone's own views were more complex than the formula suggests (Hastings, 1994).

4.2 The demonisation of African religion and culture

The second construct concerned African indigenous religions. They were not usually referred to as religions in missionary speech; they appeared as 'fetishism', 'animism', 'heathenism', or witchcraft. Veneration of ancestors was interpreted as idolatry or the worship of demons; initiation ceremonies, polygyny, bridewealth, and traditional healing were treated as moral aberrations to be eliminated. African deities and spiritual intermediaries were not consulted but treated as either delusions or demons (Mudimbe, 1988). The practical implications were culturally disruptive: converts were often asked to adopt European baptismal names, move to mission villages, and cut off ties with 'pagan' relatives (Sundkler & Steed, 2000).

Later scholars, including Lamin Sanneh (1989), pointed out that missionary translation of the Bible into African languages subtly undermined this construct. The use of the old African names for the God of Scripture (Nyame, Modimo, Mulungu, Lesa, Olódùmarè) implied that Africans knew God even before the coming of the missionaries. This concession would form the basis of later inculturation theology and had consequences for the colonial entanglements of biblical scholarship itself that are still being examined in recent studies (Mbuvi, 2022).

4.3 Ecclesial paternalism and the racialised church

There was a third construct within the church itself. Mission churches were set up as appendages of European 'mother' churches: doctrine, liturgy, hymnody, architecture, and canon law were imported wholesale, and ecclesiastical authority remained in white hands long after African membership had become the overwhelming majority (Hastings, 1994). The ordination of African clergy came late, the pay was lower, promotion was rare, and the immaturity of Africans was assumed in church order. In settler societies this paternalism hardened into a full-fledged racial theology. The Dutch Reformed Church's synod of 1857 resolved that converts from heathenism should be received into existing congregations where possible, but allowed separate worship where, 'as a result of the weakness of some', integration was thought to hinder mission; a pragmatic concession that, within a century, had become a theological defence of separation.[2] Some strands of the Dutch Reformed tradition evolved a biblical justification for racial separation, the 'biblical warrant' of apartheid against which Boesak and Tutu would later rebel. In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, meeting at Ottawa, declared apartheid a sin and its theological justification a heresy (World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1982; Boesak, 1984).

4.4 The privatisation and spiritualisation of salvation

Lastly, colonial Christianity was often individualist and other-worldly, in the sense that it was concerned with the salvation of individual souls for heaven rather than with the material situation of the colonised. Such a gospel was largely silent on issues of land alienation, forced labour, taxation, and racial humiliation, and that silence was a form of consent. Later, Jean-Marc Ela (1980/1986) would name this construct outright, arguing that a Christianity more concerned with sacramental routine while peasants starved was a betrayal of the God of the Exodus. The spiritualised gospel thus became a seamless part of the colonial theological package: sanctifying the colonizer, demonising the colonised culture, subordinating the African church, and anaesthetising social consciousness.

4.5 Gender, domesticity and patriarchy

A fifth construct, less often named in the older literature, concerned women. Mission discourse on polygyny, bridewealth and 'Christian domesticity' redefined women's roles, and mission schooling commonly prepared boys for clerical and artisanal work and girls for housekeeping and motherhood (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). Mission patriarchy did not simply replace indigenous patriarchy; the two often reinforced one another. I. A. Phiri's (1997) study of Chewa women in a Presbyterian church in central Malawi shows how women experienced mission-introduced and indigenous restrictions as overlapping. This matters for the argument that follows,

[2]Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, 1857. The resolution preferred common worship but permitted separate services where, as it put it, integration was thought to hinder mission work.

because it explains why African women theologians came to criticise both colonial theology and its male African critics (Section 8).

AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE AND RESISTANCE

5.1 Early resistance: Ethiopianism, prophetic movements and early writing

African resistance to colonial theology predates African academic theology. Its first major institutional manifestation was the Ethiopianist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the response of African clergy who resented white ecclesiastical domination and established independent churches under African leadership (Sundkler & Steed, 2000). The name conjured up Psalm 68:31 ('Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God') as a declaration of African ecclesial dignity. In practice, leaders like Mangena Mokone and James Mata Dwane in South Africa, and their counterparts in Nigeria and the Gold Coast, enacted the gospel's independence of European mediation before later theologians would argue for it in writing (Hastings, 1994).

A second wave, the prophetic or 'Zionist' and Aladura movements led by figures such as William Wadé Harris in West Africa, Simon Kimbangu in the Congo, and Isaiah Shembe in South Africa, took the process further, indigenising worship, healing, and prophecy. Colonial states recognised the political nature of these movements: Kimbangu served some thirty years in a Belgian colonial prison. Women were prominent among the prophets. Nontetha Nkwenkwe, a Xhosa prophet in the Eastern Cape, preached moral renewal and unity after the influenza epidemic of 1918 and was confined by the authorities in 1922 and held in an asylum until her death in 1935 (Edgar & Sapire, 2000); Alice Lenshina's Lumpa Church in Northern Rhodesia (from 1954) later came into conflict with the state (Sundkler & Steed, 2000). Theologically, the African Initiated Churches represent religious innovation as a challenge to colonial theology; sociologically, they represent religious innovation as social protest. They did not challenge colonial theology mainly with treatises but with alternative institutions, hymns, prophecy and liturgy, which are theological texts of another kind, and by the end of the twentieth century they counted tens of millions of members (Sundkler & Steed, 2000). Importantly for the argument of this article, these movements were from the beginning constructive as well as reactive: they did not only protest against mission control but also built something in its place.

Alongside this institutional resistance there was an early written critique. Edward W. Blyden, born in the Caribbean and active in Liberia and Sierra Leone, argued in Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race (1887) that mission Christianity had too often denationalised its African converts, and the Gold Coast lawyer J. E. Casely Hayford's Ethiopia Unbound (1911) made a related plea for cultural self-respect against the same pressure. These writings predate academic African theology by half a century and show that claims about African dignity within Christianity were already being published before the middle of the twentieth century.

5.2 The intellectual turn: from adaptation to authenticity

In the decades around political independence, academic African theology came into being. One of the earliest landmarks was the volume Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent ('Black priests question themselves'), published in 1956 by francophone Catholic priests who asked how a faith so closely tied to Europe could take root in African cultures. In the anglophone world, E. Bolaji Idowu's demand for the 'indigenisation' of the Nigerian church, set out in Towards an Indigenous Church (1965), and John Mbiti's monumental rehabilitation of African traditional religion in African Religions and Philosophy (1969), with its insistence that Africans were 'notoriously religious' (Mbiti, 1969, p. 1) and had known God before the missionary arrived, reversed the colonial evaluation of African spirituality. This generation no longer asked whether African culture could be tolerated in Christianity, but whether Christianity could be authentic in Africa without it.

This ferment institutionalised from the 1970s. Two broad tendencies emerged through the platform of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT, founded 1976) and its pan-African counterparts: a liberation stream oriented towards political and economic domination, and an inculturation stream oriented towards cultural and religious alienation. Even Rome was impressed by the inculturationist argument, approving the Zairean (Congolese) rite for use in Catholic liturgy in 1988. A third voice, that of

women theologians, is discussed in Section 8. A recent thematic survey attests that these currents remain alive, plural, and contested today (Maluleke, 2022).

THE LIBERATION STREAM: BOESAK, TUTU, AND ELA

6.1 Allan Boesak: Black and Reformed

Allan Boesak's Black and Reformed (1984) is the paradigm of Black theology in South Africa. The central, and provocative, argument of the book is that the Reformed tradition, the very tradition used to justify apartheid, is, correctly interpreted, a tradition of liberation. Boesak refused to surrender Calvinism to his Afrikaner oppressors. He insisted that the lordship of Christ over all aspects of life, as the Reformed tradition had taught, meant that a theology legitimating racial separation was not a legitimate form of the faith but a pseudo-gospel, an ideology in biblical guise (Boesak, 1984). To be a black man who was Reformed was not, he insisted, a contradiction, but a unified perspective, one that made the heresy of apartheid fully visible.

Boesak's intervention exemplifies a typical form of African theological resistance: the appropriation and inversion of the colonizer's canon. Instead of dismissing the imported tradition, he appropriated its normativity and used it to attack the institutions that had transmitted it. This argument found ecclesial expression when he was elected president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches at Ottawa in 1982, the assembly that declared the theological justification of apartheid a heresy, and through his close association with the Belhar Confession, drafted from 1982 and adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. Sociologically, this is counter-hegemony from within (Gramsci, 1971): the dominated group takes over the legitimating discourse of the dominant.

6.2 Desmond Tutu: ubuntu, justice, and forgiveness

It is his range, from the struggle to the post-struggle, that makes Desmond Tutu analytically significant. Under apartheid, Tutu spoke a Black theology of protest based on the imago Dei: a system that demeaned and dehumanised people denied their dignity in the eyes of their Creator. As Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), he wrote No Future Without Forgiveness (1999), a theology of national reconstruction. The book argues that retributive justice alone could not heal South Africa; what was needed was restorative justice, in which the social fabric would be mended through truth-telling, acknowledgement, and forgiveness.

Most importantly, Tutu based his argument not so much on European law as on the African moral principle of ubuntu: 'a person is a person through other persons' (Tutu, 1999). It is here that the liberation and inculturation streams are most clearly brought together: an African anthropology is used to address a problem (transitional justice) inadequately addressed by European theology and law. In this way, Tutu turned the colonial construct on its head: Africa was no longer the student to be taught theology but the source of a moral resource to be given to the world. Critics have asked, however, whether the TRC's theology of forgiveness passed too hastily over the issues of restitution and economic justice (Mamdani, 2002), thereby keeping Tutu's legacy within, rather than beyond, the liberationist debate.

6.3 Jean-Marc Ela: the cry from below

Whereas Boesak and Tutu responded to settler racism, the Cameroonian Catholic priest and sociologist Jean-Marc Ela responded to neocolonial poverty. African Cry (Cri de l'homme africain, 1980; English translation 1986) was written over several years out of pastoral work among the Kirdi peasants of northern Cameroon; it combined sociological analysis with theological protest. Ela challenged the structures that oppressed African peasants (extractive economies, urban elites, international dependency) as colonialism by other means and argued that a church focused on imported sacramental routine, and silent about hunger, had effectively taken the side of the oppressors. He called for a Christianity of the village and of the granary, in which the Eucharist could not be celebrated honestly while the community lacked bread (Ela, 1980/1986).

Ela's programme of 're-reading the gospel from below' is the most sociologically explicit of the responses considered here. He was adamant that theology's interlocutor was not the European academy but the African

poor, and that fidelity to the Exodus tradition meant that the church had to be a site of social struggle. That he left Cameroon for Canada in 1995, fearing for his life after the murder of his colleague, the priest Engelbert Mveng, speaks to the political stakes of this theology.

THE INCULTURATION STREAM: BEDIAKO AND THE AFRICAN RENAISSANCE OF CHRISTIANITY

7.1 Kwame Bediako: Christianity as a non-Western religion

The Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako mounted the most systematic assault on the construct that Christianity is a European religion. In Jesus in Africa (2000) and his earlier Theology and Identity (1992) and Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion (1995), Bediako argued that the identification of Christianity with the West is a historical accident, not a theological truth. Christianity, he pointed out, was African before it was European: Alexandria, Carthage, and Ethiopia belong to its earliest history. The twentieth-century shift of Christianity's demographic centre of gravity to the Global South was therefore not an anomaly but a homecoming, the 'renewal of a non-Western religion' (Bediako, 1995).

Bediako's constructive move was Christological. If Christ is genuinely universal, he must be translatable into every cultural world, and in Africa this means engaging the spiritual universe of ancestors, chiefs, and mediators. Bediako proposed that Christ be understood as the supreme Ancestor and the true elder Brother, the one who fulfils, rather than merely abolishes, the mediatorial roles of African tradition (Bediako, 2000). On this understanding the practices and ceremonies associated with ancestors and chiefs are not simply abolished but re-read Christologically: their mediatorial function is taken up into Christ, so that African converts need not abandon the ancestral and chiefly structures of their societies, only redirect the ultimate locus of mediation toward Christ himself. Drawing on Sanneh's (1989) translation thesis, he treated the vernacular Bible as the decisive act of decolonisation: once Scripture speaks Twi or Ewe, using the African names of God, the gospel has ceased to be foreign property. Against the missionary claim that Africans must be de-Africanised to be saved, Bediako answered that African identity is itself a gift taken up into Christ.

7.2 The wider inculturation project

Bediako stood within a broader movement. Idowu (1965) and Mbiti (1969) had prepared the ground by re-describing African traditional religion as genuine praeparatio evangelica rather than demonic error. Congolese and East African Catholic theologians developed African liturgies, christologies of Christ as Healer, Master of Initiation, and Chief, and small-Christian-community ecclesiologies modelled on the African extended family. The 1994 African Synod in Rome adopted the image of the Church as the Family of God. Inculturation thereby reversed each element of the colonial construct in turn: African languages became bearers of revelation, African rituals became liturgical resources, and African social forms became models of church.

The stream has its internal critics. Liberationists such as Ela (1980/1986) warned that celebrating culture could become an alibi for ignoring poverty and dictatorship; women theologians warned that 'African culture' was often invoked selectively to entrench patriarchy (Oduyoye, 1995). The mature position, articulated across EATWOT debates and in Martey (1993), is that inculturation and liberation are two dimensions of one task: a gospel that is culturally African but socially indifferent is as truncated as one that is politically radical but culturally foreign.

AFRICAN WOMEN'S THEOLOGY: A CRITIQUE FROM WITHIN BOTH STREAMS

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was launched in 1989 under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and it is best understood neither as a third school beside liberation and inculturation nor as an addition to them, but as a critique of both from within. Its foundational volumes, The Will to Arise (Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 1992) and Oduyoye's Daughters of Anowa (1995), argue that African women were constrained by two overlapping structures: the colonial and missionary construct of Christian domesticity (Section 4.5) and the patriarchal elements of African culture itself. Their argument is that colonial theology and its male African critics alike had overlooked the double burden borne by African women (Oduyoye, 1995).

The women's critique has a methodological as well as a substantive side. Kanyoro's (2002) 'cultural hermeneutics' asks that culture be read as critically as Scripture: the inculturationist appeal to 'African tradition' cannot be taken as self-authenticating if tradition has silenced women, and the liberationist appeal to 'the oppressed' cannot be taken as inclusive if the oppressed are imagined as male. In this way women theologians turned the central tools of the earlier streams, the retrieval of African resources and the option for the marginalised, back on those streams themselves.

This has two consequences for the argument of this article. First, the early women prophets discussed in Section 5.1 show that women were agents of resistance long before the Circle: the contribution of the Circle was to give that agency a theological and publishing platform, not to introduce it. Second, the idea of 'constructive self-definition' has to be qualified. African self-definition has never been the work of a single voice, and a Christianity that defines itself as 'authentically African' is open to the question: authentic for whom? That internal contestation is better read as a mark of maturity than as a weakness of the tradition.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: PRE- AND POST-INDEPENDENCE THEOLOGY

Reading the material diachronically, four shifts of emphasis distinguish post-independence theological production from what preceded it. Table 2 summarises them together with the qualifications that the evidence requires, and the discussion below takes each in turn.

Table 2. Four shifts of emphasis, and the evidence that qualifies each

Dimension	Pre-independence tendency	Post-independence tendency	Qualification from the evidence
Site of struggle	Church order and institutions (secession)	Discourse: the academy, journals, publishing	Blyden and Casely Hayford wrote early; hymnody and prophecy in the early churches are also theological texts
Mode	Apology and demonstration of African Christian fitness	Confident self-definition; reversed burden of proof	The early independent churches enacted self-definition; protest continued in Boesak, Tutu and Ela
Understanding of salvation	Other-worldly (the colonial gospel)	Integral: spiritual, cultural, political, economic	Healing and deliverance in the prophetic churches already carried a this-worldly sense of salvation
Adversary	Single: the colonial-missionary complex	Plural: neocolonial economics, authoritarianism, patriarchy, prosperity teaching	Under apartheid the adversary was still colonial in form; missionary dissent (Philip, Colenso) complicates the idea of a single opponent

From institutional secession to intellectual construction. Pre-independence resistance was primarily practical and ecclesial, because Africans were largely excluded from theological academies and publishing (Sundkler & Steed, 2000). Post-independence resistance is additionally textual and academic: Africans now write the theology, edit the journals, and confer the degrees. The site of struggle moved from church order to discourse itself, though not entirely, as the early writings of Blyden and Casely Hayford show.

From defensive apology to confident self-definition. Early African Christian writing often laboured to prove that Africans could be proper Christians on European terms. The post-independence generation reversed the burden of proof: Mbiti (1969) and Bediako (1995) required European Christianity to justify its parochialism, while Boesak (1984) required the Reformed tradition to repent of its racism. The colonial question 'Can the African be truly Christian?' became the postcolonial question 'Can Christianity be truly itself without Africa?' Yet the early independent churches had already answered the first question in practice.

From other-worldly salvation to integral liberation. Against the privatised colonial gospel, post-independence theology redefined salvation as integral: at once spiritual, cultural, political, and economic. Tutu's (1999) restorative justice, Ela's (1980/1986) option for the peasantry, and the Circle's gender critique (Oduyoye, 1995) all instantiate this widened understanding of salvation. The healing and deliverance emphases of the prophetic churches, however, already carried a this-worldly understanding of salvation.

From a single adversary to plural adversaries. Pre-independence theology confronted one visible opponent: the colonial-missionary complex. Post-independence theology confronts a more complicated field (neocolonial economics, indigenous authoritarianism, patriarchal custom, and, more recently, imported prosperity gospels) and has had to diversify accordingly (Kgatle, 2023). The persistence of critique after the departure of the colonizer confirms the postcolonial insight that colonial constructs outlive colonial administrations (Fanon, 1963).

9.1 Counterexamples and limits of the trajectory

Five considerations qualify the claim that African theology moved from reactive protest to constructive self-definition. First, constructive self-definition was present from the beginning: the Ethiopianist and prophetic churches built institutions, liturgies and hymnody that were not merely reactions. Second, protest persisted: Boesak's and Tutu's apartheid-era writings are protest against a regime that was, in effect, colonial, and Ela's critique of neocolonial dependency is protest in the same mode. Third, the account of resistance leaves out African Christians who worked within mission structures: Samuel Ajayi Crowther, consecrated Anglican bishop of the Niger in 1864, was a translator and church-builder whose career does not fit the narrative of resistance, and many African teachers, catechists and pastors were agents of the mission rather than its critics (Hastings, 1994). Fourth, the periodisation is contested and regionally uneven. Mugambi (1995) places the turning point at the end of the Cold War, not at independence, and independence itself came between 1957 and 1994 in different parts of the continent. Fifth, the trajectory may partly reflect the survival of evidence: written, elite and published production is more visible after independence, while the oral, ritual and popular production of the earlier period is harder to recover (Section 3.5).

These qualifications do not overturn the proposed trajectory, but they change its character. The pattern is better described as sedimentation than as replacement: protest, institution-building, textual argument and internal critique have accumulated, and each new stage has added to the earlier ones without displacing them. What changed after independence was less the presence of self-definition than its scale, its textual systematisation and its institutional location in universities, publishing and ecumenical networks.

ONGOING RELEVANCE

Four considerations establish the continuing significance of these theological responses.

The demographic argument. Christianity's numerical centre now lies in the Global South, with Africa home to the largest Christian population of any continent. The questions African theologians raised (whose categories define the faith, whose culture shapes its worship, whose experience sets its agenda) are therefore no longer regional questions but questions about the future character of world Christianity itself. Bediako's (1995) 'renewal of a non-Western religion' has become demographic fact.

The decolonial argument. Contemporary movements to decolonise knowledge, curricula, and institutions across Africa are rediscovering that theologians conducted one of the earliest and most sustained decolonisation projects on the continent. The strategies visible in this corpus (inverting the canon, re-translating the tradition, re-centring the subaltern and retrieving indigenous ethics) offer transferable models for decolonial work in other disciplines, sociology included. Recent conceptual mappings of decolonial African theology (Sakupapa, 2023) and continent-wide initiatives to decolonise theological curricula (Nyika et al., 2022) confirm that this archive is being actively re-appropriated rather than merely commemorated.

The justice argument. The material conditions that provoked liberation theology persist in altered forms. Ela's insistence that faith communities cannot remain neutral before structural poverty speaks directly to contemporary

debates on debt justice, resource governance, and climate injustice, where African churches remain among the most extensive civil-society networks on the continent. Tutu's restorative framework, meanwhile, has travelled far beyond South Africa into international transitional-justice practice.

The internal-critique argument. The tools forged against colonial theology are now being turned on new distortions: prosperity teachings that re-commodify salvation, imported culture-war agendas, and patriarchal readings of both Scripture and tradition. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians exemplifies this continuing vitality, and decolonial analyses now extend to African Pentecostalism itself (Kgatle, 2023). The tradition of critique inaugurated against colonialism has become a permanent, self-correcting feature of African Christian thought.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING, CHURCH PRACTICE AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

The analysis suggests the following implications. They are derived from the argument of this article and have not been tested as interventions; they are offered as proposals for discussion.

Theological education

- Organise courses on African theology by construct and response (Table 1) rather than by school, so that students see liberation, inculturation and women's theology as answers to a common set of colonial claims.
- Teach pre-independence sources (Blyden, Casely Hayford, the hymnody and prophetic records of the African Initiated Churches) alongside the canonical post-independence texts, so that the early history of African self-definition is not left out.
- Make women's theology (Oduyoye, Kanyoro, Phiri) core reading in every course on African theology and not a single elective, and assess students on the cultural-hermeneutical method, not only on its conclusions.
- Require some teaching and assessment in local languages, following the translation argument of Sanneh (1989) and Bediako (2000), and give priority in library acquisitions to African publishers and journals (Nyika et al., 2022).

Church practice

- Develop pastoral guidance, not blanket prohibition, on ancestral and chiefly rites, along the lines of Bediako's Christological re-reading, so that converts are not forced to choose between church and kin.
- Ensure parity of ordination, remuneration and promotion for African clergy in denominations that still maintain external centres of authority, and open leadership roles to women.
- Link worship and social ministry, following Ela: parishes that celebrate the Eucharist can ask what they are doing about hunger in the same community, for example through food-security and debt-justice programmes.
- Use the same critical tools to examine prosperity teaching and imported agendas, instead of assuming that only colonial-era distortions need critique.

Institutional reform

- Mission agencies and partner churches should review governance, property ownership and funding arrangements for the survival of colonial-era dependency, and publish the results.
- Churches and theological colleges should preserve the oral and women-led histories that the written record underrepresents, so that future research is less dependent on elite sources.

- Seminaries and denominations should audit curricula, appointments and leadership for gender balance, and report on progress.

CONCLUSION

Colonial Christianity in Africa drew on a recurring set of theological constructs: the fusion of gospel and civilising mission, the demonisation of African religion and culture, the racialised subordination of the African church, the spiritualisation of salvation, and the gendering of church and home. This article has followed the equally coherent, albeit internally diverse, African response. It began with institutional secession and prophetic movements, and with early written critique, long before independence; it took academic form around independence; it matured into liberation and inculturation streams; and it has been tested and enlarged from within by African women theologians. In figures such as Boesak (1984), Tutu (1999), Ela (1980/1986), Bediako (1992, 2000) and Oduyoye (1995), it produced a body of thought that challenged each colonial construct and offered an African self-understanding of the faith in its place.

The claim that this history moved from reactive protest to constructive self-definition holds as a statement of emphasis, but not as a linear sequence: self-definition was enacted before it was written, and protest outlasted colonial rule. From a sociological perspective, the history can be interpreted as a contest for symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991): a contest over who has the authority to define the good society, the human person, and God in Africa. That contest has largely been won at the level of ideas, since few today would defend the missionary structures of the nineteenth century, but it remains unfinished at the level of structures, where economic dependency, gender inequality, and new imported orthodoxies reproduce old patterns in new clothes (Maluleke, 2022; Sakupapa, 2023). The African theological response to colonialism thus teaches a double lesson: imposed frameworks of meaning can be challenged and overturned by those subjected to them, and the work of challenging is never finished. African theology is not a closed chapter of church history but a living archive of decolonial method, and its historical analysis is a contribution not only to religious studies but also to the sociology of knowledge and of liberation.

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