

*Review*

# **The influence of the African revolution on African theology**

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**The main thesis of this work is to portray Pan-Africanism as a movement that is destined to give all people of African descent a sense of identity, self-determination and liberation by supplying significant context for African theologians. Pan-Africanism, notwithstanding all its limitations, can be an effective instrument of African liberation and hence, proffers great opportunity for authentic theological enterprise. However, not minding the perceptible differences and competing strategies, the main motif of the Pan-African movement is the unification of all people of African descent and the commitment to black liberation. Culture and religion in African cosmology intermingles. Therefore, for a contextual theologian to work well in Africa, the act of culture and religion of the people must be considered and highly rated, for religion does not exist in a vacuum.**

**Key words:** Pan-Africanism, culture, politics, nationalism, inculturation, liberation, incarnation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The impact of theological knowledge which many African theologians acquired from the local catechists and teachers continue to be a significant part of the worldview which is updated in their works today (Odozor, 2020). The African search for authentic and prophetic theology has at once been a rejection of the dominant Western theological paradigms and an acceptance of African realities and worldviews in theological hermeneutics. As was stated at a conference held by All African Conference of Churches, "in one sense the spiritual dynamic of the African Revolution arises out of the impact of the Gospel and Christian education, and the church has the duty to give sense of direction to the human aspirations it has helped to awaken. This revolution is primarily concerned with (humanity) and (human) dignity in society (Report of

the Commission of the Christian Basis for Participation in the Africa Revolution, 1967)." Further, since the church's principal concern is the human relations to God and neighbor, it cannot be apathetic to the African quest for a fuller human life in society.

Historically, theology which is the systematic study of the nature of God and religious belief has always been in continuous effort to liberate the enslaved and dehumanized community. In Africa, it has been part and parcel of the revolutionary struggle to be fully human in a world that denigrates black humanity (Martey, 2009). The effect of the African revolution on the emergence and progress of contextual theology in Africa has been remarkable for it challenges the African church and its leaders on the need to respond and relate their gospel

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faith “to the African search for a fuller human life in new societies. The roots of this quest for fuller humanity, which began in the political arena, can be traced to the end of the nineteenth century and, especially, the first decade of the twentieth century. Thus, a more organized black resistance to colonial oppression and racism started with the rise of Pan-Africanism and gained more momentum with African nationalism after World War II. The African revolution has undergone many phases and has had significant provisional goals. But its supreme objective has always been to bring full humanity to the African. This was how the African church understood and interpreted it. For instance, at its 1965 Enugu Consultation, the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) defined the African revolution as “a movement of liberation of African people from colonial domination and from the enslaving aspects of traditional societies.”

According to Aimé Césaire in the work, *Discourse on Colonialism*, from the writings of both Africans and blacks of the diaspora, African Christians have been educated on how colonialism wearied African societies of their very essence, crushed African culture underfoot, destabilized African institutions, confiscated their lands, smashed their religions and destroyed their magnificent artistic creations. The Africans are left with little or no chance of extraordinary possibilities for new innovational skills (Césaire, 1972). Additionally, Emmanuel Martey is of the opinion that these same Africans are now cognizant of the relationship of North Atlantic theology to the African situation. For example, they have read European theologians and know how some of them opposed the violence of the two world wars. But none of these theologians, not even Karl Barth, regardless of his attitude against the naked aggression and violence of Nazi Germany, deal with the problem of colonial violence and military oppression against the African nations. Therefore, as “a movement of liberation” fighting with oppressive and manipulative forces, outside and within the African continent, the African revolutionaries mounted a “theological pressure” on African Christians particularly the church, which were regarded as an implementation of imperialist oppression by the mission-trained nationalists. African Christians and Church leaders responded to the situation with a thoughtful survey of the “Liberation Movement” that was permeating the whole continent and finally conveyed the African revolution under the central point of Christian consideration and theological interpretation.

Liberation theology which turned out to be the language of the African Church in the mid-1960s was wanting in the theological lexicon of the early African theologians who started writing in the late sixties. As an alternative, their adherence to the revolutionary fight gave rise to theological flow recognized as “African theology,” which centered spatially on the cultural-religious feature of African revolution and shifted its concentration from political and economic factors. According to James Cone,

“Whenever one recalls today that the revolution, which in fact radicalized African Church leaders, began as a political movement of liberation, one wonders why the theological perspectives that emerged did not develop with a similar focus-taking liberation seriously (James, 1983).” However, one can only begin to understand when one realizes that the very idea of adjusting the gospel message to suit the African condition had come from Western missionaries whose interests “the seed of perpetual Western superiority and domination’ would continue to protect” (Alyward, 1977) Undoubtedly, proof such as this is a concise support for the South African black theological critiques that “When the Africans seemed to be encouraged to produce indigenous theology; they are just being used as they have always been to solve the psychological problems of the missionaries” (Buthelezi, 1978). Historically, there have been three areas of resistance in the revolution against foreign domination: political, cultural and religious. It is these factors, according to Martey that have contributed to the emergence of African theology. Culture and politics therefore were the key factors that gave rise to tension between African theology and Black theology and they will be buttressed further.

## THE POLITICS OF LIBERATION

Politically, the objectives and philosophies of the African revolution are defined by the three intimately connected components of the African liberation movement, specifically, Pan-Africanism, nationalism and socialism. According to Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, these political components are so interconnected that “one cannot be achieved fully without the other,” and no genuine liberation can be attained by any region if one of these is missing (Kwame Nkrumah, *Revolutionary Path*, 1968). Manas Buthelezi asserts that, while pan-Africanism and African nationalism offered the framework in which theology was to surface, some African Christians also found inside socialist principles a way of expressing innovatory sociopolitical and economic ambitions that could generate new modes of relationships and create a model for the future (Buthelezi, 1978). Socialism will then be omitted at this point given that African theology, unlike Black theology, particularly in its second stage which started in the early 1980s, has not taken socialism (even Marxism) seriously in its methodology.

Pan-Africanism is a scheme of ideas; therefore, it does not lend itself to a simple description. What makes the task of description even more burdensome is the fact that these ideas have not emerged from an individual person or a single group at one specific instance in history, but rather are an assemblage of connected ideas articulated over years by people of African descent from within and in the diaspora, who were addressing the issue of emancipation. These ideas expressed their worldview,

their goals and prescribed strategies for the achievement of these goals. For example, the concept of Pan-Africanism advanced by blacks of the diaspora such as W. E. B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, George Padmore and others are different from that advocated by later African nationalists, which gave rise to the organization of African Unity (OAU) (DuBois, 1903, 1989). For instance, Kwame Nkrumah's view of Pan-Africanism is different from Julius Nyerere's, likewise that from Nnamdi Azikiwe (Ayo, 1979). However, not minding the apparent dissimilarities and competing strategies, the primary objective of the Pan-African movement has always been the unanimity of all people of African descent and the dedication to black liberation.

According to Hollis et al. (1967) the Pan-African spirit may be traced to the final decades of the nineteenth century and is remarkable in the liberating thoughts and political philosophy of Edward Wilmot Blyden, whose "Pan-Negro" ideology has been described as "the most important progenitor of Pan-Africanism (Hollis et al., 1967)." It is this same spirit of black solidarity that led to the 1900 Pan-African Conference in London, which affirmed with W.E.B. DuBois that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (DuBois, 1986). A cautious study of these conferences offers the analysis of the intellectual world of the Pan-African movement. The procedural activities of the different Pan-African organizations disclose a combined awareness of some particular goals and prescribed strategies for achieving such goals. Three major concerns surfaced from these conferences from which a concord agreement can be made on the meaning of pan-Africanism and these include: unification of all black people, dedication to the empowerment of black people and the emancipation of all black people (Ofoatery-Kodjoe, 1984). From these threefold objectives, Pan-Africanism can be explained as a collection of ideas behind the Pan-African movement which aims at unifying all people of African descent to empower them to be instruments of their own liberation. It is apparent that the idea of pan-Africanism-to give all people of African descent a sense of identity, self-determination and liberation has supplied the pertinent context for African theologians "to formulate theological constructs on Africanization and liberation" (Muzorewa, 1985). As a movement which not only reaffirms African identity and independence but also takes a specific stand against colonialism, racism and neocolonialism, Pan-Africanism, notwithstanding all its limitations, can be an effective instrument of African liberation. It can as well be a required medium for authentic theological enterprise. Everybody needs liberation for even the perpetrators of violence are not free until the whole community is emancipated. Nnamdi Kanu, an outstanding Biafra activist is advocating for the liberation of Africans. In union with many other Biafrans who were voicing out their opinions in social media for liberation of Biafra from Fulani herdsmen and Boko Haram in Nigeria, he is

convinced that when Biafra gains her independent, it will be a pace setter for other African nations. He then urges all lovers of freedom to participate actively in their liberation process. This is an indication that people's ideas and involvement, individually and collectively is essential in their emancipation especially in Africa.

## AFRICAN NATIONALISM

Among the three political components of the African liberation movement cited earlier, African nationalism has had the utmost impact on the African Church. The movement guarded Christians to interpret reality into dialogue with the God of their faith and consequently to tackle the issues in terms of their theology. African nationalism emerged when the inconsistency between Western claimed democratic values and colonial autocratic oppression became noticeable to Africans. Even though African nationalism is a Western philosophy, it became an effectual weapon for Africans in their fight against imperialism. Nationalism then became "the chosen philosophy of the colonial independence movement" (Martin and Molloy, 1974). It was the Pan-African movement, particularly its fifth congress in Manchester, which "provided the outlet for African nationalism and brought about the awakening of African political consciousness"

However, like the ideology of Pan-Africanism itself, the spirit of African nationalism can also be traced back to the nineteenth century, primarily to Edward W. Blyden, whose ideas on colonialism articulated "both racial and nationalistic positions aimed at achieving a particular type of social revolution (Mudimbe, 1941). The response of the African church to the changes brought by African nationalism "has been one of gratitude and appreciation," as it saw the preaching of the gospel as "one of the most dynamic 'prime movers' of social change in Africa." (Edward, 1967). The overriding motifs of African nationalism as was clarified in the African Church had a twofold motivation: towards liberation from European colonial domination and towards consolidation of national unity. The Church affirmed that: "The two dominant motifs of African nationalism, liberation and consolidation are the exact opposite of those of Western nationalism, colonialism and divisiveness" (Martin and Molloy, 1974). All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in its declaration on "The Church and Nationalism," did not simply perceive nationalism as "opposition to foreign domination" but, more prominently, as "the common desire of a people to work together for their emancipation from any form of bondage, whether colonial, economic, social or racial." One of the benefits of African Nationalism is the awakening on Africans to include some of their cultural practices in liturgical worship like the use of gun, drum, flute and other local implement in the church. Such an act is headway to free emancipation without compulsion for culture does not exist in a vacuum.

## THE ACT OF CULTURE

Edward Blyden in the book: *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* wrote that the African in the nineteenth century “will not fade away or become extinct before the Europeans as the American and Australian aborigines”. Moreover, in twentieth century, Amilcar Cabral asserts that: “One of the most serious mistakes, if not the most serious mistake, made by the colonial powers in Africa, may have been to ignore or underestimate the cultural strength of African people” (Amilcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, 1979). Substantial proof shows how Africans strongly resisted the attempts of both the colonial administrator and the missionary to dehumanize and destroy their culture and identity. The first congress of Black Writers with its topic “The Crisis of Black Culture,” fought against three evils that it called the “shameful practices of this twentieth century,” specifically “colonialism; the oppression of the weaker peoples; and other racialism” (The First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, Paris, 1956). This cultural assemblage urges theologians and other professionals to “participate in the historical task of unearthing, rehabilitating and developing (black) culture so as to facilitate their being integrated into the general practical conditions for the revival of and the growth of Negro cultures.” Cultural resistance has always been an integral and determining part of Africa’s struggle for liberation.

The Post-independence African theorist who made a special emphasis on culture as a cause of resistance to foreign domination is Amilcar Cabral. For Cabral, people’s domination “can be maintained only by the permanent and organized repression of the cultural life of the people concerned.” He then explained that, “to take up arms to dominate a people is, above all to take up arms to destroy ... their cultural life, for as long as part of that people can have cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation.” The aspiration of national liberation, according to Cabral, is to reclaim this right that had been taken over by imperialist domination. Stressing liberation as an act of culture, Cabral argues that: “If imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, ‘national liberation is necessarily an act of culture.’ He thus sees the liberation movement as ‘the organized political expression of the struggling people’s culture.’ Any group of people who is fighting for liberation is doing so in connection with their worldview. I believe that to suppress people’s culture in the process of emancipation is a counterfeit and inhumane, for both people and religion emanate from a particular cultural setting.

With this conversation on the position of culture in the liberation movement, Cabral made an important input to the advancement of political deliberation as well as to theological hermeneutics: Political liberation cannot be achieved separately from cultural liberation and vice versa. Cabral has left much to posterity with the

aforementioned stress on political and cultural liberation. Further, from Cabral’s investigation, it becomes clear that “culture, which in the hands of academics tends to become the monopoly of elite, or becomes the object of dispassionate academic analysis, is now put in the service of liberation” (Ayodele, 1979). Similar to Frantz Fanon, Cabral has asserted that during the struggle of God’s people for liberation, “Culture is not put into cold storage” (Frantz, 1990). This notion of culture as an effectual weapon in the liberation struggle, or the concept of liberation as “an act of culture,” is becoming famous in the new gesture of African theology and among young African theologians. However, African’s cultural struggle against Western cultural imperialism, to which Cabral and other modern writers refer, also has its historical origins in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as was mentioned earlier in Pan-Africanism. Culture does not exist *ex nihilo* (in a vacuum) as I earlier stated. In other to avoid anything like cultural imperialism, this work proposes for inculturation theology without compulsion like the idea of using some traditional instruments in liturgical celebration as mentioned earlier.

## AFRICAN THEOLOGY AS INCULTURATION THEOLOGY/LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Numerous theologians prefer the term “African theologies of inculturation” to “African theologies of liberation,” which may be said to incorporate (at least, as close relatives) African Black theology. Evidently, African theology must be comprehended in the context of African life and culture and the artistic endeavor of African people to shape a new future that is dissimilar from the colonial past and the neo-colonial present. In this regard, African theology ought to stand in opposition to the manufactured ideas of North Atlantic theology by defining itself in accordance to the struggles of the people in their battle against the structures of domination. It is the bounding duty of African theologians to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people (The “Final Communiqué” of the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians in Torres, 1979). The expression, Africanization, like liberation, was first used in the political arena. Thus, it is associated with the nationalist movement as the structures of hegemony when colonial states began changing hands from Europeans to Africans. Africanization symbolizes the commencement of a new theological tendency toward a quest for a genuinely essential African opinion on the Christian faith.

In an attempt to express and re-express the Christian message with African idioms and conceptual tools, terminologies such as “adaptation, accommodation, indigenization, translation, incarnation, localization, inculturation, interculturalization and so forth have been used to contextualize African theological discourse... the

writers proclaimed the need to Africanize Christian doctrine, cult, pastoral practices and art, basing them on African culture and religious tradition" (Patrick, 1989). At the 1974 Synod of Bishops in Rome, African Catholics thus rejected "theology of adaptation," which they measured to be "completely out of date" and rather, accepted, "theology of incarnation," which was open to the ambition of African people. Incarnation was preferred because it implied "immersing Christianity in African culture ... just as Jesus became man, so must Christianity become African." Thus African Catholic Christians finally came out with Christological oriented expression intensely rooted in Scripture to explain the nature of their theological task. The incarnation paradigm has played an indispensable role in interpreting the theological notion of inculturation. Pioneers of this expression always use the economy of the Incarnation as its replica, that Jesus Christ may be seen as "the subject-matter of inculturation" (Alyword, 1990). As a consequence, Jesus is regarded as "the model of incarnation and inculturation" that incarnated in a particular context (Schineller, 1990). Nevertheless, since Black theology emanates from a situation of oppression and suffering of people who profess their belief in God and who inquire what the Gospel of Jesus Christ has to say about the situation, it is as well, a theology of liberation (Allan, 1995). Owing to the fact that incarnation happens in space and time, Christ who is the liberator of the entire human race in the Christian perspective is also incarnated in African culture. As the God of the oppressed, He shares in their daily plights for liberation from all kinds oppression.

## BLACK THEOLOGY AS LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Liberation is not a hypothetical proposition to be argued in a philosophy or theology seminar. It is a historical truth, born in the fight for freedom in which an oppressed people acknowledge that they were not created to be kept in custody or traded. The momentum of Black theology lies in the certainty that the content of the Christian gospel is liberation. Therefore, any talk about God that fails to take seriously the righteousness of God as revealed in the liberation of the weak and downtrodden is not Christian language (Cone, 1975). As an indigenous theology of African-Americans, Black theology is the narrative of a faith experience emanating from the history and culture of American black people (David, 2014).

Black theology developed from this new theological hermeneutic that seeks to liberate oppressed blacks from white supremacy and to meet the challenges brought about by the violent circle of apartheid in modern society. Liberation, therefore, is the Black theological option for anthropological dignity as against anthropological poverty. It is a search for authentic humanity. Servitude and marginalization deform the image of God in His creatures and renders them less human. This work therefore

believe that liberation of the entire humanity devoid of imperialism, using Africa as a case study is a decisive option for human flourishing.

## CONCLUSION

Contextual theology is a way of doing theology that takes into account two realities. The first of these is the experience of the past, recorded in scripture and preserved and defended in the church's tradition. The second is the experience of the present or particular text, which consists of one or more of at least four elements: personal or communal experience, "secular" or "religious" culture, social location and social change (Bevans, 2011). The key thing about contextual theology is the centrality of experience. "It is the honoring and/or testing or critiquing of experience that makes theology contextual. What this means is that for contextual theologians, anything can be a source of theology: values in one's own culture; one's experience as a male or female; one's experience as a marginal person in one's culture; one's encounter with another religion; the experience of multicultural tensions in one's society; or the challenge of technology today." The challenge is to reconstruct the integrity of the church's tradition in light of relevant background theories and warrants from contemporary experience. Pan-Africanism therefore calls for proper involvement of Africans in their liberation process and elevation of African culture and practices in theological hermeneutics.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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