

EVOLUTION OF MODERN AFRICAN THEOLOGY: NAVIGATING HISTORICAL DYNAMICS.

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Abstract

This study unravels the intricate influences shaping modern African theology. Moving beyond academia, it reveals how African communities adapted beliefs to historical shifts. Employing qualitative analysis, the research explores cosmological, theological, and sociological dimensions. Historical factors, categorized into Cultural/Political and Theological/Ecclesiastical, include events like the Second World War, Pan Africanism, and the Negritude Movement. The study emphasizes the dynamic interplay of these factors, showcasing the adaptability of African theological thought. It serves as a concise mirror reflecting the vitality in the ongoing conversation between history, society, and intellect within African theology.

Introduction

Recognizing the importance of comprehending the influences behind the articulation and formation of modern African theology is paramount. This significance extends far beyond an academic exercise; it delves into the core of how African society actively shaped their beliefs amidst the dynamic shifts in history, society, and intellectual landscapes. This exploration not only illuminates the adaptability and resilience inherent in African theological thought but also underscores its profound ability to navigate and assimilate a myriad of influences over an extended period.

Insightfully, this journey through African theological development reveals a nuanced response to historical, cultural, and intellectual challenges. The adaptability of African theological thought emerges as a conscious effort by communities to preserve their identities, reconcile diverse influences, and assert their agency in the face of external pressures. It showcases a dynamic interplay, where tradition and innovation converge to form a uniquely African theological narrative. (Hagaba, 2009)

Furthermore, the resilience demonstrated in this theological evolution speaks to the enduring spirit of African communities. Amidst colonial legacies, political upheavals, and cultural shifts, African theological thought not only survived but thrived. It reflects a continuous dialogue with the past, a deliberate engagement with the present, and a forward-looking approach that integrates diverse perspectives. (Igboin, 2011)

Methodology

The researcher utilized a combination of primary and secondary sources to collect data. Primary sources included personal observations and oral interviews, providing firsthand insights into the subject matter. Secondary sources encompassed a wide range of published and unpublished materials such as journals, textbooks, online resources, articles, dictionaries, and other library materials. This comprehensive approach to data collection ensured a thorough exploration and understanding of the research topic.

For data analysis, the study employed a qualitative method, utilizing cosmological, theological, and sociological approaches. This multifaceted approach allowed for a nuanced interpretation of the data, providing a contextual understanding of the influences that shaped the articulation and formation of modern African theology within the framework of African Christian theology. The qualitative method facilitated a deeper exploration of the subject, capturing the complexities and intricacies inherent in the theological development under examination.

Development and evolution of African Christian thought

According to Mbiti (1998), “the articulation and formation of modern African theology emerged in the 1950s and gained momentum in the 1960s” (p.146). Han & Beyers (2017) also observe that African theology did not emerge in a historical or social vacuum. There had been various factors which prepared and accelerated the emergence of modern African theology before the 1950s.

However, the prelude to African theology can be traced back to the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century (Maluleke, 2001). Hence, it is important to investigate some of the historical factors which contributed to the development of the modern African theology.

In essence, the articulation and formation of modern African theology were not spontaneous events but the outcome of a gradual process influenced by a multitude of factors. Investigating this historical context becomes imperative to unravel the intricacies of how African theological thought evolved over time. These historical events can be grouped into two categories: Cultural/political factors and Theological/ecclesiastical factors:

1. Cultural/Political Factors:

The colonial powers began to decline in the wake of the World War II (Young III 1993). After World War II, various political movements emerged in the colonies with a view to gain political independence (Schoffeleers, 1990)).

During the period of agitation for independence, early African intellectuals were concerned not only with political matters, but also with the promotion of the African cultural-religious heritage. Although the main goal was to regain political self-control in Africa, cultural liberation was not excluded. African intellectuals and nationalists recognized that there would not be genuine political liberation without cultural liberation (Bujo, 1992).

The negation of African culture, to the African people, meant to deprive African people of their very identity; the revitalization of African culture meant to recover African identity (Zezeza, 2009). Therefore, the cultural self-affirmation by revitalizing the African cultural-religious heritage became a ‘matter of priority’ to regain political-self determination in Africa (Van der Merwe, 1989).

The cultural liberation of Africa from the destructive influence of Western culture seemed to be the first step towards the political liberation from Western colonialism in Africa. For this reason, they used African culture and religious symbols as a means to awaken the African people’s spirit of struggle, and their rights and duties towards political liberation (Munga 1998). The rise of nationalism led to the resurgence of the traditional culture and religions. As a result, the movements for regaining of national independence were manifested in both political and cultural spheres simultaneously. Thus these Cultural/political factors include;

i. Evolution of African Educated Elites

In the 15th century, Europeans introduced Western education to West Africa, primarily through missionaries, viewing it as a tool for effective evangelism. This marked the inception of African nationalism, fostering independent thinking among the educated elite (Barnes, 1981). By the mid-19th century, Western education produced new elite, including "liberated slaves" in Sierra Leone, who became advocates for African emancipation, engaging in socio-cultural and political struggles. Despite some elites collaborating with colonial powers, the educated class eventually turned into nationalists, contributing to the dismantling of European imperialism in Africa (Nelson, 2015). In response to colonization and Western Christianity, early African church leaders, such as Bishop Samuel Ajai Crowther, stressed the indigenization of Christianity on African soil. Crowther, a former slave educated in the West, recognized the depth of traditional religion and sought to develop the Church based on African cultural heritages (Ajayi, 1965). Crowther emphasized the positive values of African society and advocated adapting

African idioms to express scriptural values, laying the foundation for indigenized theological development in Africa (Ajayi, 1965).

ii. Events of the Second World War

The colonial era in Africa, divided by the First and Second World Wars, witnessed a significant shift in dynamics, with African participation in these wars playing a pivotal role in the struggle for independence (Falola, 2001). African involvement in the wars exposed them to ideas of self-determination and independence (Ibhawoh, 2007). During the Second World War, Britain rallied West African subjects against the Nazi system, inadvertently providing Africans with an opportunity to articulate nationalist demands for freedom (Ibhawoh, 2007). The war served as a catalyst for anti-colonial movements across Africa, intensifying pressure on colonial regimes (Ademola, 2012). During post-World War II, the decolonization process began, leading to the independence of many former colonies in the 1960s). The war had a profound impact on African perspectives, broadening social and political horizons. Rugege (2017) emphasizing the ripple effect of the wars on the Africans averred that “witnessing white soldiers in vulnerable states humanized them in the eyes of their African comrades, challenging previous perceptions of the colonial elite” (p.1).Unexpectedly, the unintended consequences of the European Second World War extended to theological development in Africa. The spirit of self-government and self-determination fostered theological determination among African Christian elite. These leaders began to assert that the God of the white is not superior to the God of the black, prompting the development of a theology rooted in the African experience and worldview (Molyneux, 1988). This theological shift became a vital aspect of Africa's post-colonial identity and intellectual independence.

iii. Pan Africanism - Nationalistic Movement

Pan-Africanism, originating from the 1900 Pan-African conference in London, aimed at African self-determination against imperialist domination. (Clarke, 1988) The slogan 'Africa for the Africans' echoed its resistance to overseas imperialists. Rooted in racial solidarity due to discrimination, early African Diaspora intellectuals laid the groundwork for Pan-Africanism. The movement evolved, reaching a peak with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 (Ajala, 1973). Post-World War II, Pan-Africanism merged with African nationalism, emphasizing racial equality, political independence, and cultural preservation.

African nationalism stressed three key issues: racial equality, political independence, and the preservation of African culture. The interconnection of Pan-Africanism and African nationalism became evident, serving as ideological instruments for African nationalists. The influence of Pan-Africanism and African nationalism extended to African theology. Idowu (1973), emphasized the need for a church that affirms African identity. The spirit of Pan-Africanism and African nationalism inspired theologians, contributing to the emergence of African theology (Muzorewa, 1985). African nationalism, as a context for theology, encouraged theologians to affirm African cultural values despite the colonial experience. Muzorewa (1985) asserted that African nationalism played a crucial role in inspiring African theologians in the 1950s, shaping the theological movement that prioritizes the vitality of African cultural values.

iv. Negritude Movement

Negritude, a black ideological movement, emerged in 1930s France led by intellectuals like Senghor, Césaire, and Damas (Bujo, 1992). Coined by Césaire in 1939, Negritude signifies the unity of Negro culture and values (Irele, 1965). Motivated by dissatisfaction with Afro-French experiences, Negritude founders sought to reject French colonial racism (Kohn & Sokolsky, 1965). Senghor emphasized Negritude as the awareness and defense of African cultural values. The movement responded to the alienation of blacks in history, providing a platform for asserting black identity globally (Nielsen, 2013). Negritude was politically significant, contributing to the rejection of colonialism and influencing the self-perception of the colonized (Nielsen, 2013). Senghor, as Senegal's first President, championed Negritude's universal valuation of African people, blending traditional customs with modern expression (Nielsen, 2013).

While Negritude's end date is unclear, its impact persists in artistic expressions asserting black identity. In theology, Negritude influenced African theologians to rediscover their cultural-religious heritage, leading to a yearning for indigenized Christian Church and theology in Africa (Bujo, 1992)

2. Theological-Ecclesiastical Factors

Prior to the emergence of the various African theological movements, there existed many ecclesiastical and theological movements that influenced the foremost African elite and theologians that initiated the theological independent of the Africans, these factors include:

i. North American Liberation Theological Movement

Originating in Latin America, Liberation Theology, primarily championed by Roman Catholic thinkers, focuses on social concern for the poor and political liberation for oppressed peoples. It addresses issues of dependency, poverty, and injustice, aiming to establish a fair and just society reflecting the kingdom of God (Okolo & Ojukwu, 2023). Gustavo Gutierrez considered the father of Liberation Theology, defines it as a theological reflection rooted in the Gospel and the experiences of those committed to liberation in Latin America. This reflection arises from shared experiences in the struggle to abolish injustice and build a freer and more humane society (Levine, 1988).

The core methodology of Liberation Theology is to view theology from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of liberation and the revelation of a liberating God, emphasizing the human side of the struggle against poverty and injustice (Stenberg, 2006). Thus, Liberation Theology represents a departure from traditional theological understanding and procedure. It also introduces a new methodology, shifting the theological balance towards a Church engaged in social issues (Escobar, 1987). The movement has been criticized for advocating "justified violence" as a means of achieving liberation. Badiako (1989) suggests that actions against oppressive structures, including violence, are justified as self-defense in the process of conscientization. Gutierrez asserts that the Church's mission is defined in relation to revolutionary processes (Stenberg, 2006).

While Liberation Theology originated in Latin America, its influence extends beyond the region. The Union of Third World Theologians, especially in Africa, reflects an emphasis on the themes of liberation theology, hence, Liberation Theology stands as a powerful theological movement advocating for social justice and the liberation of oppressed peoples.

ii. C.M.S Influence

Kelebogile (2016) emphasizes the pivotal role of language as a powerful tool for communication, cognitive development, and expression of worldviews. Language not only forms national identity but also contributes to national unity and cultural understanding, especially when rooted in indigenous languages. The influence of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) on theological development in Africa is evident in its focus on vernacular development. Modern Yoruba orthography, for example, originated from CMS missionary work among the Aku (Yoruba) of Freetown, setting the standard for subsequent literature (Falola, 2001).

CMS's impact goes beyond conversion; it involves reducing African languages to writing, translating scriptures, and promoting literacy. The ability to read in the mother tongue often became a prerequisite for baptism in CMS mission churches (Pavliková-Vilhanová, 2007). Bible translation into local languages was a crucial aspect of CMS missionary work. This facilitated the communication of Christian principles in culturally relevant ways and contributed to the building of written literary languages (Bediako, 1994). The CMS missionaries' linguistic efforts became the foundation for future theological works in Africa, hence, the translated Scriptures played a vital role in shaping indigenous theological consciousness. Bediako (1989) stresses that treating African mother-tongues as a fundamental medium in theological discourse is essential for the depth of impact and growth of African theology.

The commitment of CMS to developing African languages aligns with the perception in Christian theology that the Word of God is best understood in mother-tongues (Acts 2:11). Pobe (1979) argues for

the ideal status of African theologies being in vernacular languages, emphasizing their importance in the formation of theological expression.

The CMS missionaries' dedication to vernacular development left a lasting legacy in African theological development. The use of indigenous languages became a fundamental test of the impact of Christianity in African life, shaping the direction of African theology (Bediako, 1989). The rich linguistic heritage of Africa continues to provide opportunities for developing indigenous Christian theology.

iii. The Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council, convened from 1958 to 1965, brought transformative changes to the Catholic Church's relations with the modern world. These changes included a renewed focus on consecrated life, ecumenical efforts, and a universal call to holiness. The Council, closed under Pope Paul VI in 1965, aimed to address contemporary challenges faced by the Church. (Catholic Church, 1985). The reforms following Vatican II had far-reaching consequences, as Benedict XVI (2013) note, These changes encompassed the use of vernacular languages in Mass, a shift from ornate clerical regalia, revised liturgical prayers, and alterations to the liturgical calendar. The introduction of celebrating Mass facing the congregation (*versus populum*) and modern aesthetic changes in music and artwork marked a departure from traditional practices, stirring divisive opinions among Catholic faithful.

In Africa, Vatican II resonated strongly with the continent's socio-political climate of the early 1960s. The Council's emphasis on localization, pluralism, and recognition of diverse cultures aligned with the era's stress on African political and cultural values, decolonization, and unity (Hastings, 1986).

Vatican II coincided with a significant period of nationalist fervor in Africa, contributing to a sense of optimism and hope. The Council's announcement generated religious excitement alongside the rising nationalist movements, reflecting the parallel movements of political and Church reform in Africa (Hastings, 1979).

Before the Council, the Catholic Church in Africa reflected a Eurocentric perspective in leadership, theology, and liturgy. Vatican II presented an opportunity for a more inclusive, locally rooted theology to emerge in Africa. The Council's discussions intersected with the pressing issues faced by the "young" African churches (Orobator, 2013). The theological status of the African Church before Vatican II was characterized by a Euro-Christian theology. The Council, however, opened possibilities for the development of African theology. Vatican II's positive impact on Africa's theological and ecclesiological development is evident in the recognition of African Traditional Religions as legitimate expressions of African spirituality. This acknowledgment marked a significant shift in the Catholic Church's attitude towards Africa's religious diversity (Gichure, 2008).

Vatican II had a profound impact on the African Church, shaping its theology and ecclesiology. The Council's reforms aligned with the continent's quest for identity, unity, and cultural recognition, contributing to the development of a more inclusive and contextually relevant African theology.

iv. The World Council of Churches (WCC)

The World Council of Churches (WCC), established in 1948, is a global inter-church organization fostering unity, common witness, and Christian service. Its diverse membership includes Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, Old Catholic, Protestant, and some Pentecostal churches, while the Catholic Church participates as an observer (World Council of Churches, 2014; Cross & Livingstone, 1974). Guided by a commitment to confessing Jesus Christ, the WCC envisions visible unity among churches, expressed in common worship and Christian life. The organization aims to fulfill its calling to the glory of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and advance towards unity for the world's belief (World Council of Churches, 2017). During the formative years of the WCC, Africa was primarily viewed as a mission field with limited ecclesial identity. However, with the independence of new African nations and churches in the late 1950s and 1960s, Africa emerged on the ecumenical stage. Autonomously established churches sought membership with the WCC, introducing a new dimension to the ecumenical

agenda, addressing development, social justice, racism, conflict resolution, evangelism, lay formation, and theological awareness. (Ohlmann and frost, 2020)

In response to this evolving landscape, African churches established the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in 1963, becoming a regional ecumenical organization. Presently, the WCC's Africa region consists mostly of countries south and east of the Sahara, including islands in the Indian Ocean. Egypt, while part of the Middle East region, aligns with the AACC. The WCC currently counts 94 member churches in Africa, fostering cooperation through national councils of Churches, Christian Councils, and similar bodies. (Sakupapa, 2018)

v. The African Independent Churches (AICs)

African Independent Churches (AICs) represent a significant chapter in the history of Christianity in Africa. Originating independently in Africa, distinct from foreign missionary influences, these churches embody a unique fusion of Christian beliefs and African cultural heritage. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, dating back to the 4th century, serves as a notable early example (Mwaura, 2005). Turner (1967) defines AICs as churches founded in Africa by Africans, primarily for Africans, with limited association with Western Christianity (p.16). Han (2013), drawing on Daneel (1987), characterizes AICs as movements emerging from the interaction between tribal communities and foreign Christian influences, resulting in a synthesis of African religious traditions with Christian elements (p. 37).

Historically, AICs arose during the colonial period when black converts faced challenges reconciling their beliefs with the teachings of foreign church leaders, leading to schisms. Reasons for these splits ranged from political motives, aiming to escape white control, to cultural considerations, attempting to integrate Christian beliefs into an African worldview (Oduro, 2008). The manifesto of AICs, as articulated by Pobee and Ositelu (1998), emphasizes the desire to express Christian faith in an African context, free from Western theological influences. AICs sought to grapple with traditional beliefs and practices, making Christianity culturally relevant and alive to Africans. Their theological foundation often centers on the belief that God has a special plan of salvation for oppressed black people, as reflected in biblical texts like Psalm 68:31.

While accusations of syncretism exist, with claims of partial integration of African traditional beliefs, AICs have played a transformative role. They influenced euro-oriented denominational rivals to adapt to African cultural awareness and beliefs (Pobee and Ositelu, 1998). Hence, the influx of Christians into AICs prompted mainline churches to reconsider their worship modes to be more culturally meaningful.

AICs, driven by a spiritual hunger for a church aligned with native settings, organization, liturgy, and theological interpretations, have provided African Christians with a profound sense of belonging. They exemplify essential religious movements, offering a spiritual home for African Christians, shaping church life according to African forms and leadership (Hastings, 1979). In essence, AICs have contributed significantly to the development of Africa by interpreting the Bible in the African existential situation. They serve as a compelling example of how Africans understand the Christian gospel in harmony with their traditional religious-cultural heritage, providing theological motivation for the indigenization of Christian doctrines and liturgies (Muzorewa, 1985).

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, it's crucial to thoroughly look into these specific factors in history that played important roles in shaping the development of modern African theology. Understanding these influences deeply is necessary for a complete understanding of how African theological thinking evolved. This detailed exploration reveals an intriguing journey in modern African theology. It shows how historical, cultural, ecclesiastical and social factors intertwined to shape the distinctive theological landscape of the continent. These aspects are not separate; they are interconnected elements forming the fabric of African theological development.

In simple terms, the rise and growth of modern African theology weren't sudden or isolated events. They came together as a result of a complex mix of historical events. These events unfolded over a long period, from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, showcasing the depth and richness of African theological discuss. Exploring these various influences helps us deeply understand the basics and the changing path of theological discussions in Africa.

In essence, this exploration provides more than a historical account; it serves as a mirror reflecting the vitality of African theological thought. It invites us to appreciate not only the depth of tradition but also the dynamism inherent in the ongoing conversation between history, society, and intellect. Understanding these influences enriches our grasp of the living, breathing nature of African theology, resonating with insights that transcend mere academic discourse.

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