

Colonial Shadows and Sacred Spaces: Decolonisation in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *This article examines the persistence of colonial legacies within the theology, practices, and institutional powers structures of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ). Using a qualitative design grounded in postcolonial theory, the research analyses archival records, church documents, and semi structured interviews with clergy and lay leaders. The findings show that Eurocentric theological frameworks and governance models continue to shape the Church, limiting the integration of indigenous knowledge systems and African spiritual expressions. The study identifies emerging efforts toward contextual theology, particularly in healing ministries and liturgical adaptation, but notes ongoing institutional resistance and internal tensions. It concludes that meaningful decolonisation requires deliberate theological reconstruction, institutional reform, and the affirmation of African cultural and spiritual agency to enhance the Church's relevance and authenticity in a postcolonial context.*

Keywords: Decolonisation, Postcolonial theology, Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, African theology, Religious hybridity

1. Introduction

Religion remains one of the most potent forces in shaping societal norms, individual behaviour, and collective consciousness. While it has the potential to liberate and empower, it can also function as a mechanism of control, especially when co-opted by hegemonic powers. In the colonial context, Christianity was often used as a weapon to legitimise European dominance over African peoples, cultures, and knowledge systems. As Karl Marx (1844) famously argued, religion can serve as “the opium of the people,” offering spiritual solace in the face of material deprivation while simultaneously obscuring the structural roots of that suffering. This critique holds particular relevance in understanding the historical introduction and institutional entrenchment of Christianity in Africa.

During the colonial period, Christianity played a dual role. On one hand, it offered comfort amid oppression, promising eternal salvation in exchange for earthly endurance. On the other, it discouraged resistance to colonial exploitation by framing suffering as divinely ordained (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Chitando, 2021). While missionaries preached humility, sacrifice, and obedience, colonial powers expropriated land, extracted resources, and dismantled indigenous social systems. As the adage became popularised, “*Africans closed their eyes in Prayer while Europeans plundered their land.*” This dynamic enabled colonial powers to entrench economic and political control under the moral cover of religious salvation.

Africans were systematically encouraged to prioritise spiritual redemption over socio-economic emancipation. As a result, many came to accept colonial social hierarchies and material deprivation as natural or even divinely sanctioned. Religion, thus, functioned not only as a coping mechanism but also as a tool for pacification and ideological domination. The framing of earthly suffering as a prerequisite for heavenly reward distracted Africans from the urgent need to challenge colonial injustices and restructure exploitative systems (Mujinga, 2021).

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ), like many missionary-founded institutions, is deeply implicated in this historical entanglement. Despite political independence in 1980, the MCZ's theological orientation, ecclesial governance, and liturgical expressions remain largely shaped by Eurocentric traditions (Masvotore, 2022; Kadenge, 2020). These enduring colonial frameworks inhibit the church's ability to express an authentically African ecclesiology rooted in local cultures, values, and worldviews.

This article employs postcolonial theory as a critical framework to interrogate the MCZ's colonial inheritance and to explore pathways toward its decolonisation. Postcolonial theory provides tools for analysing how colonial structures persist in contemporary institutions and how colonial power continues to operate through cultural, theological, and institutional forms (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Mukonyora, 2022). Through this lens, the article demonstrates that decolonisation is not only necessary for theological relevance but also vital for the church's credibility, authenticity, and effectiveness in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

Background of the Methodist Church

Methodism, a branch of Protestant Christianity, traces its origins to the reform movements initiated by John and Charles Wesley in 18th century England. Both ordained priests of the Church of England, the Wesley brothers were nicknamed ‘Methodists’ due to their methodical approach to prayer, study, and personal discipline, often referred to as ‘The Holy Club’ at Oxford. Following John Wesley's death, the movement gradually evolved into an independent denomination.

Central to Wesley's theology was the doctrine of holiness, expressed in his emphasis on sanctification through faith. In a letter dated 19 June 1771, Wesley articulated this vision:

Many years since I saw that ‘without holiness no man shall see the Lord.’ I began following after it, and inciting all with whom I had any intercourse to do the same. Ten years after, God gave me a clearer view... namely by faith in the Son of God. And immediately I declared to all, ‘we

are saved from sin, we are made holy, by faith (Wesley, cited in Wesley Jr., 1991, p. 82).

Missionaries from the Transvaal District of South Africa established the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ) even though it emerged from British Methodism. These missionaries, led by Owen Watkins and Isaac Shimmin, arrived in Harare at (then Fort Salisbury) on 29 September 1891 (Mujinga, 2017; Mujinga, 2020). Though the Methodist Church in Southern Africa operated autonomously, the Zimbabwean mission remained under the jurisdiction of the British Conference, reflecting continued colonial ecclesiastical control (Gondongwe, 2011).

The MCZ was offered land for mission work by the British South Africa Company (BSAC), a colonial entity instrumental in the occupation and administration of Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia). Within a year, Methodist missions had been established at Epworth (Salisbury), Nenguwo, and Kwenda in Mashonaland East. White missionaries and African evangelists drove these missions from South Africa. Reverend Isaac Shimmin advocated for African leadership in evangelisation, stating:

It is a favourite theory of most Christian workers out here in this new mission... that under the careful and constant supervision of the minister, the native evangelist can become the most effective missionary, especially in a country like Mashonaland (Zvobgo, 1991, p. 9).

While this model recognised the evangelistic potential of Africans, it also preserved missionary paternalism. African evangelists were not treated as equals, and the prevailing Eurocentric theology assumed that Africans had to become culturally European before they could be authentically Christian. This attitude was widespread among European missionaries. As Manyoba (1991) recalls, when Cecil John Rhodes laid the foundation stone of the Main Street Methodist Church in Bulawayo, he reportedly described African culture as “hopeless,” implying that entry into the church would bring civilisation, and implicitly Western, transformation.

Despite its colonial complicity, the MCZ also played a role, albeit unevenly, in resisting colonial rule. While institutional opposition to colonialism was limited, individual clergy and lay members stood against oppression. However, much of this resistance remains undocumented, signalling an urgent need to recover oral histories and testimonies from those who lived through this era (Kadenge, 2020).

The MCZ achieved full autonomy from the British Conference in 1977, a critical milestone that reflected the broader push for African ecclesial self-determination during the decolonisation era. Yet institutional structures and theological frameworks rooted in colonialism persisted, necessitating continued efforts toward decolonisation of both governance and belief.

2. Theoretical Framework

Decolonisation is a complex and multifaceted process involving the dismantling of colonial structures, ideologies, and power relations, and the restoration of cultural, political,

and epistemological autonomy to formerly colonised peoples. It goes beyond political independence to include economic, cultural, and psychological liberation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). As a historical and ongoing project, decolonisation seeks to redress colonial injustices, restore suppressed identities and languages, and empower indigenous populations to reclaim control over their own destinies.

At its core, decolonisation entails both resistance and reconstruction: the rejection of imposed colonial frameworks and the revitalisation of indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices, and belief structures. Importantly, decolonisation does not necessitate a wholesale rejection of modernity or the achievements of the colonial encounter; rather, it calls for a critical engagement with inherited systems to recover what is contextually meaningful. Decolonisation involves ‘selective rejection’, a strategic process of disentangling African institutions from Eurocentric assumptions while retaining what is pragmatically useful (Wiredu, 2009).

In the context of the African church, decolonisation is an urgent theological and ecclesiological imperative. Many African churches, including the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ), remain steeped in foreign theological frameworks, liturgical practices, and leadership models. These colonial legacies continue to alienate African Christians from expressions of faith that are rooted in their own histories and cultures (Chitando, 2021). The African church must, therefore, undergo epistemic decolonisation to become truly indigenous and contextually relevant.

The postcolonial theoretical framework provides a critical lens for analysing the ongoing impact of colonialism on religious institutions, cultures, and identities. Emerging from Marxist and post-structuralist thought, postcolonial theory interrogates the power dynamics between colonisers and the colonised, challenging dominant narratives and uncovering the subtle mechanisms through which colonialism persists after formal political independence (Christiansen, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Its application in theological studies enables scholars to expose how Christian missions often operated as tools of empire, spreading both religious doctrine and colonial authority.

Postcolonial theory is inherently interdisciplinary, intersecting with theology, history, sociology, and political science. It provides tools to deconstruct the Eurocentric foundations of Christian theology and examine how these ideas shaped African religious consciousness. Crucially, it foregrounds the voices and experiences of those historically silenced or marginalised by colonial systems. Religion itself has played a pivotal role in the development of postcolonial thought. The emergence of liberation theology in Latin America, Asia, and Africa contributed significantly to anti-colonial and postcolonial struggles (Rukundwa & Van Aarde, 2007). Liberation theologians challenged the complicity of the church in systems of oppression and argued for a faith that speaks directly to the lived realities of the oppressed. This intersection of religion and resistance has informed the postcolonial analysis of missionary activity in Africa, where the church often served both as a spiritual institution and an agent of empire.

The process of decolonising the church must address the theological, liturgical, and institutional residues of colonialism (Dube, 2020; West, 2022). The missionary project in Africa was not neutral; it was combined with imperial expansion. Missionaries were not only ‘planting’ churches, they were also expanding empire, consciously or unconsciously embedding Western dominance within African spirituality. The postcolonial framework, therefore, provides a necessary foundation for analysing and challenging the colonial legacies within the MCZ. It equips scholars and practitioners with the tools to reimagine the church not as a foreign implant but as an authentically African institution grounded in indigenous theological insights and cultural relevance.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate how colonial legacies continue to shape the theology, practices, and institutional structures of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ). Semi-structured interviews also provided a multidimensional understanding of the decolonisation process. Archival documents, church records, and denominational reports helped to trace the MCZ’s historical entanglement with colonial structures. Content analysis of sermons, church constitutions, and liturgical texts helped to identify lingering Eurocentric theological frameworks. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with the clergy, lay leaders, and theologians offered contemporary perspectives on decolonisation efforts and the challenges encountered. The data was thematically analysed leveraging on postcolonial theory, which provides a critical lens for unpacking the power dynamics between coloniser and colonised and interpreting ecclesial transformation in a postcolonial context (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Dube, 2020). The study sought to answer five guiding questions related to colonial influence, decolonisation efforts, institutional challenges, historical reconciliation, and the implications for the MCZ’s global relationships. These questions worked as themes that were followed by this research.

Colonial legacies

The question of how colonial legacies have shaped the theology, practices, and power structures of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe is central to the ongoing process of decolonising ecclesiastical institutions. A foundational starting point is recognising that Christianity, in its missionary form, was not voluntarily adopted by Africans, but rather was imposed through colonial systems. Western imperial powers systematically suppressed indigenous spiritualities, beliefs, and ritual practices, thereby creating a disjunction between the African individual and their cultural and religious heritage. Christianity, introduced through colonial conquest, became a vessel for the broader imposition of Western norms and epistemologies. The African, in embracing Christianity, often did so at the expense of their own traditions, language, and identity. As Mbembe (2021) observes, colonial evangelism operated within a logic of cultural substitution rather than integration.

The early missionaries deliberately sought to separate Christianity from African traditional religions, presenting the

latter as pagan, heathen, or demonic. However, Africans, far from passively assimilating foreign doctrines, adapted and localised Christianity into their own cultural frameworks, infusing it with indigenous languages, moral codes, and communal structures. Consequently, the missionary ambition to fully Europeanise African believers was not entirely successful. Methodist missionaries, like their counterparts from other denominations, often carried with them an implicit belief in the superiority of European language, customs, and worldviews. They are culpable in efforts to denigrate African cultures and religious expressions, frequently failing to acknowledge that Africans already possessed sophisticated spiritual systems and conceptions of the divine. As Khumalo (2020) emphasises, the missionaries did not introduce religion to Africa; rather, they encountered an already spiritually vibrant continent.

The Eurocentric interpretation of the Bible presented during the colonial period silenced African cosmologies and displaced their ways of relating to God. Theology was presented as a fixed Western intellectual product rather than a dynamic, contextually rooted discourse. This theological colonisation inhibited the development of African Biblical hermeneutics and theological agency. Christianity came packaged with colonial control, creating a paternalistic dependency on Western mission agencies for theological education, financial support, and ecclesiastical legitimacy. This stifled the emergence of indigenous theological frameworks and perpetuated a culture of dependency that still echoes in many African churches today (Nyoni & Mutasa, 2022).

Machingura and Kalizi (2024) cite Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o to illustrate the entanglement of religious mission with imperial power. Wa Thiong’o vividly recalls that missionaries arrived with a Bible in one hand and a gun in the other, symbolising the dual strategy of spiritual indoctrination and material conquest. Their agenda was to intoxicate Africans with religion while colonial administrators expropriated land and labour for industrial expansion. Whether missionaries were complicit or naive, their mission was part of a broader colonial design aimed at subordinating African people and cultures. Funding for missionary work often originated from colonial powers, thereby tying religious expansion to imperial interests. The notorious 1883 letter from King Leopold II of Belgium to missionaries in the Congo Basin makes this connection explicit: missionaries were instructed not to teach Africans about God, whom they already knew, but to use the gospel as a tool to suppress indigenous spirituality, neutralise resistance, and maintain colonial dominance.

Leopold’s directives reveal a chillingly strategic manipulation of theology. Missionaries were tasked with distorting Christian teachings to glorify poverty, endorse obedience, and discourage critical thinking. This paternalistic pedagogy instructed missionaries to target children, inculcating them with loyalty to the colonial order and alienation from their own cultural teachings. In this context, education was used not to liberate but to domesticate, cultivating a submissive class of believers loyal to the colonial state rather than to a liberative God (Machingura & Kalizi, 2024). The term “patriot,” as used by Leopold, reflects a troubling conflation of missionary work with political

loyalty to colonial rule. Evangelism was repurposed as a form of ideological warfare.

The long-term effects of this theological colonisation remain evident in contemporary times. Missionary Christianity not only delegitimised African religion but actively worked to sever the African from their ancestral moral universe. Heaven was presented as a future reward rather than a transformative reality in the present, undermining any theological foundation for social justice or economic liberation. This eschatological deferral served to maintain social hierarchies and displace the African from their historical agency. The missionaries' interpretation of scripture and theological instruction functioned to support the colonial status quo, promoting spiritual resignation rather than liberation.

Efforts to decolonise Methodist theology in Zimbabwe have emerged at various historical junctures. One notable instance occurred during the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's 23rd Annual Conference in 2000, when Reverend Julius Juru remarked that "the water should take the colour of the soil on which it is flowing over." This metaphor expressed a theological vision in which Christianity, once indigenised, would reflect and be transformed by the cultural and spiritual landscape of Africa. It affirmed the idea that African Christian expression must be rooted in local realities, histories, and epistemologies. Unfortunately, the missionary legacy was one of cultural erasure rather than accommodation. African religious systems were categorised as evil and irrational, rather than complex and deeply meaningful.

In conclusion, the decolonisation of theology in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe requires an honest reckoning with its colonial past. This includes reinterpreting scripture through African lenses, reviving indigenous theological thought, and dismantling the institutional structures that perpetuate dependency and epistemic inferiority. Recent scholarship (Chitando & Biri, 2023) underscores the urgency of reclaiming theological agency by promoting contextual and liberative interpretations of Christianity in Zimbabwe and across the continent. Only through such reorientation can the Church emerge as a truly African institution, one that resonates with the spiritual, social, and historical realities of its people.

Western theological institutions introduced in Africa served as instruments for advancing Eurocentric theology. These institutions consistently characterised African Traditional Religions (ATRs) as 'pagan' or 'heathen', thus positioning them as inferior systems to be eradicated. This theological marginalisation was not incidental but part of a deliberate, systematised project of cultural suppression. The baptismal renaming of converts, stripping them of indigenous names and identities, was a profound symbol of spiritual and cultural erasure. It marked the dislocation of the African subject from their normative cosmology and the imposition of a Western religious identity. This was not merely a liturgical practice but a theological statement of colonial power.

Kadenge, a Methodist Church in Zimbabwe minister and former tutor at United Theological College, acknowledged that theological education was structured to suppress the African worldview. Resistance to the inclusion of African

Traditional Religion as a legitimate subject in theological training reflected the internalisation of colonial prejudices. Students feared ATR would 'contaminate' their faith, highlighting how deeply entrenched Eurocentric notions of spirituality had become. As Masvotore (2021) critically observes, this raises fundamental questions: was the intention of such training to produce African theologians or to manufacture Western theologians in Black skin?

Renaming at baptism, viewed through a cultural lens, disrupts rites of passage that hold deep significance in African societies. In Yoruba (Nigeria) culture, for example, the *Isomo Loruko* naming ceremony is not simply an act of identification but a spiritual covenant that links the child to ancestral lineage and communal hope (Rasack, 2010). Similarly, in Zulu (South Africa) initiation practices, renaming signifies the transition to adulthood and the assumption of new social responsibilities (Nwadiokwu et al., 2016). In this light, the Christian practice of renaming converts at baptism was a theological mechanism aimed at severing the African from their destiny, memory, and ancestral grounding.

The development of an authentically African theology was thus hindered by these imposed religious structures. Decolonisation, in this context, must involve reclaiming lost identities and reconfiguring Christianity to reflect African cultural and spiritual realities. Analogous to the early Church's decision in Acts 15, which rejected the necessity of circumcision for Gentile converts, African Christianity must free itself from Eurocentric cultural constraints. Just as the early apostles recognised the legitimacy of diverse Christian expressions, so too must African churches affirm their own theological agency.

Where decolonisation has not occurred, African Initiated Churches (AICs) have emerged to fill the void. These movements blend Christian doctrine with African cosmologies, creating spiritually resonant alternatives. The rise of figures such as Paul Mwazha and Amai Chaza in Zimbabwe exemplifies this theological reorientation. Mwazha, a former Methodist evangelist, founded the African Apostolic Church after facing institutional resistance for his experiential spirituality, which included public confession, healing, and visions—practices aligned with African spiritual expectations (Manyawu, 2016). Similarly, Amai Chaza, formerly of the Methodist Church's Ruwadzano/Manyano women's fellowship, claimed prophetic anointing and established the Guta RaJehovah Church. Her practices, including sacrificial rites and healing rituals, echoed ATR norms such as *kurasira*, offering sacrifices to appease spiritual forces (Scarnecchia, 1997).

Contemporary developments in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe reveal a new theological landscape. A growing number of ministers now adopt titles such as "prophet" or "apostle"—roles traditionally foreign to Methodist ecclesiology but deeply resonant within African spiritual frameworks. These ministers engage in healing and deliverance ministries that mirror the functions of traditional *masvikiro* (spirit mediums). Their followers perceive them as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms, with powers of divination, healing, and spiritual guidance.

Theologically, this raises critical questions about the blurred boundaries between Christian and African religious epistemologies (Normanyo, 2019).

A prominent feature of this new spiritual expression is the use of mountains as sites of prayer and divine encounter. These sacred landscapes, long associated with ancestral worship and ritual in ATR, are increasingly reappropriated by Christian ministers. Mountains such as *Goromonzi*, *Chirinda*, and *Gonarezhou* are now pilgrimage sites where believers seek healing, prophecy, and financial breakthrough. These mountains function as Christianised shrines, blending ATR spatial theology with Pentecostal practices. Not all mountains are considered sacred; particular peaks are believed to hold specific spiritual energies, echoing ATR traditions that locate divinities in nature.

This trend, however, raises ecclesiological and ethical concerns. In many cases, these spiritual gatherings are loosely affiliated with the church, often operating outside denominational accountability structures. The rise of 'altar-making' rituals and sacrificial giving (such as "seeding" with money for blessings) introduces questions of financial transparency and spiritual legitimacy. Some congregants report being instructed to build private altars at home and conduct rituals with unaudited offerings, practices that mirror traditional sacrificial rites more than orthodox Christian giving.

Theologically, these practices necessitate critical engagement. What powers are invoked at these sacred mountains? Who is the custodian of these sites, and under what authority do they operate? While hybridisation of African spirituality and Christianity may lead to syncretism, it also opens possibilities for a genuinely contextual theology that speaks to African existential realities (Dube & Mashingaidze, 2023). However, without careful discernment, these practices risk theological confusion, spiritual manipulation, and institutional fragmentation.

A pressing concern within the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe is the proliferation of healing and deliverance ministries that operate outside formal church structures. These practices are neither reported through official channels nor coordinated by the Evangelism Department, despite the presence of a full-time Evangelism Coordinator tasked with overseeing such ministries. Offerings collected at these services are not recorded in church accounts, raising questions around transparency, financial accountability, and institutional oversight. The reluctance of ministers to submit these activities to formal supervision suggests deeper structural and theological fractures within the church. It prompts critical reflection: why do certain clergy resist ecclesiastical accountability? Why has the institution failed to either formally embrace or decisively regulate such spiritually significant practices?

The root of this crisis lies, at least in part, in the inherited power structures of the colonial church. The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, like other so-called 'mainline' denominations, was built upon a patriarchal and hierarchical governance model introduced by colonial missionaries. This system centralised authority in a few powerful individuals—

typically white, male, and foreign—thus marginalising participatory decision-making and undermining communal discernment. Despite contextual shifts and demographic transformation within the church, remnants of this authoritarian model persist. It continues to shape leadership patterns, often discouraging open theological debate and innovation at grassroots levels. The structural legacies of colonialism are not merely symbolic; they are functionally embedded within the institution's polity, liturgy, and leadership ethos (Mapuranga, 2021).

Decolonising Theology and Liturgical Praxis

The process of decolonising theology in Zimbabwe may require more than rhetorical gestures. It invites a reflective and sustained engagement with African worldviews, values, and cosmological understandings. A contextual theological approach, grounded in indigenous languages, symbols, and ritual expressions, may allow worship, doctrine, and liturgy to resonate more meaningfully with the lived experiences of local faith communities. The historical dominance of European epistemologies in shaping African Christian expression has often constrained the development of theological voices rooted in African contexts. Reclaiming theological agency could enable African communities to engage Scripture, formulate doctrine, and shape ecclesial structures in ways that reflect their cultural and spiritual realities (Mapuranga & Dube, 2021; Biri, 2023).

Ross Oliver's analogy of the gospel as a "potted plant" remains a helpful metaphor in illustrating this idea. When Christianity was introduced during the colonial period, it often arrived with limitations shaped by the cultural and theological assumptions of its European custodians. The notion of transplanting the gospel into African soil may suggest a desire to let Christian theology draw nourishment from local moral values, traditional knowledge systems, and collective memory (Foster, 2019). However, for this to happen meaningfully, it would seem necessary to consider changes to liturgical forms, church governance, pastoral language, and spiritual leadership models. The African principle of *Ubuntu*, centred on relational personhood and communal wellbeing, may offer a valuable resource for imagining theological and ecclesial renewal. Some scholars have proposed that such a move might encourage expressions of church life that are more relational, inclusive, and reflective of African ethical sensibilities (Togarasei & Chitando, 2022; Chibambo & Nyathi, 2024).

At present, however, there appears to be tension within the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe between inherited structures and emerging spiritual expressions. In some cases, the Church may be seen as attempting to preserve aspects of a colonial theological framework that is losing resonance among its membership. This has been described by some as an effort to "mend the pot" rather than plant anew (Bhebhe & Sibanda, 2023). The symbols, language, and liturgical expressions drawn from earlier missionary traditions may no longer provide adequate nourishment for the contemporary African believer.

The growth of healing ministries, pilgrimages to sacred mountains, and the informal spiritual economies that have emerged outside formal church structures could be interpreted

not simply as fringe phenomena, but as indicative of a deeper spiritual yearning. These expressions may reflect an attempt to reclaim indigenous modes of spirituality, ritual power, and embodied faith. While such developments raise theological and ecclesial questions, they might also point to the limits of a theological framework that does not fully engage with the African spiritual imagination (Dube & Mashingaidze, 2023; Mugabe, 2022).

Given that the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe is now largely composed of Black Zimbabweans, both in its clergy and laity, ongoing reflection on its theological identity may be timely. A willingness to re-engage with local culture, language, and spiritual heritage could foster a more grounded and vibrant ecclesial identity. Rather than abandoning Christian orthodoxy, such a movement might enrich it, enabling the gospel to be heard more clearly in African rhythms, spoken in indigenous idioms, and lived through culturally rooted practices of justice, healing, and community. The invitation to reflect on these matters does not seek to dismiss the church's legacy but to explore new ways of being faithful to the gospel in contextually relevant ways.

Decolonisation Efforts: Challenges and Controversies

A fundamental question that emerges in the discourse on African theology is whether the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe has ever made serious attempts to decolonise its theology, ecclesial practices, and institutional structures. If such efforts have occurred, what challenges or contradictions have they encountered? Several theological thinkers and practitioners within the Methodist tradition, among them Canaan Banana, Mujinga, Masvotore, and Kadenge, have contributed to this evolving dialogue. Others, such as Madhiba and Gondongwe, have offered significant historical insights into the development of Methodism in Zimbabwe, although their focus has been more descriptive than deconstructive.

Canaan Banana, a prominent theologian and former Methodist minister, was one of the earliest voices to advocate for a contextualised and liberation-oriented theology in Zimbabwe. In his book *The Gospel According to the Ghetto* (1977), Banana urged the Church to interpret the gospel through the lens of the lived experience of Black Zimbabweans. He argued that colonial Christianity had stripped Africans of their humanity and imposed an image of God that was passive, apologetic, and disconnected from the realities of Black suffering. For Banana, biblical language as presented by missionaries was alien to the Zimbabwean context and failed to speak to the existential struggles of the African people.

Banana's "Ten Gates of Emancipation" include a striking appeal to reclaim a liberative image of God. In Gate Three, he writes:

Thou shalt not domesticate me, neither shall you define me according to your own preconceptions; but thou shalt recognise my creative presence in all people struggling for human redemption (Banana, 1977, p. 10).

This reimagining of divine agency was central to Banana's theological vision. Urbaniak and Manhoo (2020) describe

him as a "people's theologian" whose work challenged post-independence churches to confront the lingering legacies of colonial domination within both theology and social institutions. Similarly, Gunda (2012) notes that Banana consistently criticised the failure of Western theology to engage positively with African cultural values and practices. He argued for a theological paradigm that embraced African worldviews, asserting that theology is always time- and context-bound.

In *Come and Share: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Banana (1991) introduced themes drawn from liberation theology, seeking to contextualise Christianity within postcolonial Africa. Banana called for theological transformation that would render the Christian message relevant to contemporary African life. One of Banana's most provocative contributions to theological discourse was his suggestion that the Bible should be rewritten, or at least reinterpreted, to reflect African cultural and existential realities. Banana's argument was not necessarily a call to discard the Christian Bible but a critique of its interpretation through Western cultural lenses. Banana sought a decolonised reading of scripture, one that would elevate the voices of the oppressed, the marginalised, and the spiritually silenced.

While this view was controversial, it echoed wider calls across the continent for theological frameworks that affirm African subjectivity. Scholars such as Maluleke (2021) and Phiri (2020) have emphasised the need for multi-vocal readings of Scripture that foreground African experiences and epistemologies. Yet, Banana's reputation ended up being deeply affected by his conviction for sodomy, an event that led the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe to formally sever ties with him. As a result, many of his theological contributions were dismissed or forgotten in official ecclesial discourse. However, his ideas continue to inspire debates around theological liberation and the decolonisation of religious thought in Africa (Biri & Munemo, 2024).

More recently, Mujinga (2024) published a paper on enculturating the theology of healing ministries in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. This work addresses a significant and often neglected concern in contemporary African Christianity, the integration of healing and deliverance within liturgical and pastoral practice. Mujinga further argues many church members have adopted dual religious affiliations, attending Pentecostal or African Independent Churches in addition to Methodist services, because the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe has struggled to engage deeply with healing theology. He observes that healing and deliverance are central to African spiritual life and that any church failing to address them risks spiritual irrelevance in its own context.

In African cosmologies, illness is often understood not only in biomedical terms but also in spiritual ones. Many communities perceive sickness as a manifestation of spiritual conflict, whether due to ancestral displeasure, demonic attack, or curses. Consequently, healing is not considered complete unless it includes deliverance rituals such as exorcism or ancestral appeasement. Mujinga (2024) affirms that an effective theology of healing must take these beliefs seriously, without necessarily uncritically affirming every

cultural practice. His contribution aligns with broader trends in African theology that seek to bridge the gap between liturgical form and spiritual function (Chibambo & Nyathi, 2024).

Decolonising theology, therefore, is not only a matter of abstract academic interest. It raises practical questions about worship, healing, biblical interpretation, and the role of traditional knowledge in the life of the church. Despite the internal resistance and controversies that these debates have sometimes generated, they have also opened space for a richer, more inclusive, and culturally resonant form of Christian expression in Zimbabwe. As the Methodist Church continues to negotiate its postcolonial identity, these voices offer important insights into what it might mean to be faithfully Zimbabwean and faithfully Christian.

Efforts to decolonise theology, liturgical practice, and ecclesial structures within the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ) have unfolded unevenly, marked by both innovation and resistance. One of the most frequently cited gaps is the Church's limited engagement with African cosmologies in its theological frameworks. In many communities, particularly those with constrained access to medical facilities and health personnel, healing and deliverance ministries within churches serve as a spiritual and practical substitute. Many Christians avoid traditional healers, often condemned by missionaries as invoking evil spirits, turning instead to church-based prophets who are perceived to operate through the Holy Spirit. Theological symbols such as anointing oil and wristbands serve a similar function to *dumwa* (protective charms), offering tangible spiritual reassurance against perceived spiritual threats.

Mujinga (2024) highlights this dynamic and notes that Efforts to decolonise theology, liturgical practice, and ecclesial structures within the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ) have unfolded unevenly, marked by both innovation and resistance. One of the most frequently cited gaps is the Church's limited engagement with African cosmologies in its theological frameworks. In many communities, particularly those with constrained access to medical facilities and health personnel, healing and deliverance ministries within churches serve as a spiritual and practical substitute. Many Christians avoid traditional healers—often condemned by missionaries as invoking evil spirits—turning instead to church-based prophets who are perceived to operate through the Holy Spirit. Theological symbols such as anointing oil and wristbands serve a similar function to *dumwa* (protective charms), offering tangible spiritual reassurance against perceived spiritual threats.

Mujinga (2024) highlights this dynamic and notes that although John Wesley- the founder of Methodism- embraced healing as part of holistic salvation (Maddox, 2007), the version of Methodism transplanted to Zimbabwe was deeply Eurocentric. This version marginalised African spiritual views on illness and healing. Even after attaining ecclesiastical autonomy in 1977, the MCZ largely preserved a Western theological approach. According to Mujinga, this led to a theological rift that intensified during the 2008 socio-political crisis, prompting many believers to seek spiritual answers outside formal Methodist frameworks. Historically,

this theological tension has contributed to the formation of several African Initiated Churches (AICs) that split from the MCZ, such as *Guta RaJehova* (Amai Chaza), the African Apostolic Church (Paul Mwazha), and *Bethsaida* (Loveless Manhango). Post-independence, additional AICs emerged, including Harvest Apostolic Ministries (Claudius Matsikiti), Voice of God Apostolic Church (Detroit Kepekepe), and Revival Fires (Eden Chombo), all originally linked to the MCZ (Mujinga, 2024).

Many of these schisms originated in Mashonaland East, particularly around the historic missions of Kwenda and Nenguwo. Internal regional tensions, particularly between the *Njanja* (Mashonaland East) and *Wezhira* (Masvingo and parts of Midlands), have shaped MCZ's ecclesial politics. While Mujinga proposes mainstreaming healing and deliverance within MCZ theology, practical challenges persist. Some ministers treat healing and deliverance as specialised ministries, attracting prestige and separating them from collective ecclesiastical accountability. Resistance also stems from theological divisions among clergy, broadly split into three informal factions: conservatives who prioritise doctrinal orthodoxy; liberals with more permissive interpretations; and pietists (sometimes pejoratively called *pneumaticois*) who centre experiential spirituality.

Tensions are further exacerbated by disparities in theological training. Ministers trained at United Theological College (UTC) are often viewed as having stronger academic grounding compared to those trained via Theological Education by Extension (TEE), a distance-learning model. Nonetheless, healing and deliverance practices are found across both groups. It is notable, however, that no female ministers in the MCZ are currently recognised as leading such ministries, raising gendered questions about spiritual authority and representation.

Kadenge L, a long-serving minister and lecturer at UTC, has also critiqued Western theological impositions on African Christianity. In *Doing Theology in a Society in Turmoil* (2018), he recalls a 1927 missionary conference in Bulawayo where 60 missionaries debated the acceptability of using indigenous terms such as *Mwari* or *Musikavanhu* for God. The proposal was defeated in a vote, reflecting missionary anxieties that such terms might "recall heathen gods" (Kadenge, 2018, p. 89). This theological policing illustrates how missionaries viewed Africa as a godless continent and sought to erase local religious vocabularies.

Kadenge argues that this alienated African Christians from meaningful spiritual connection, substituting rich indigenous names for abstract and unfamiliar ones like "God." The missionaries were worried that if these indigenous terms were used then they will remind Africans of their pagan or heathen gods. This attitude was a true signal of how the missionaries viewed Africa; they viewed Africa as a dark, continent and Godless. In his views Kadenge states that Christianity was enslaving Africans in that they were being taken away from their way of worship and forced into a new way of worship using foreign words they are not familiar with. The terms Musikavanhu, Mwari, Unkulunkulu and Umdali are full of meaning in religion. They are not names like God. They bring out the relationship between the worshipper and the object of worship.

The argument is that religion is not new in Africa, and missionaries were not the ones who brought Christ in Africa. Christ was once in Africa (Egypt) when Europeans wanted to kill him as a baby. God directed Joseph to take baby Jesus where there was peace, where there was His (God) people the people who have *Ubuntu* as their guiding principle. In other words, it was Christ who brought missionaries to Africa not vice versa. Christ was not a stranger to Africa but the missionaries were the strangers. The challenge with Kadenge is that his thinking was never discussed in official Methodist Church in Zimbabwe forums where resolutions were to be made. Hence, his thoughts joined, the likes of Banana and Mujinga which are read by academics but are not discussed openly in forums like conferences or synods. Unfortunately, his work, like that of Banana and Mujinga, remains largely excluded from official MCZ forums.

Similarly, Masvotore (2024), a theologian at UTC, critiques the current structure of theological education in Zimbabwe. He argues that much of the training remains Western-oriented, focusing on transferring knowledge rather than cultivating contextual reflection. Unlike Jesus, who responded to questions with stories rooted in everyday realities, missionary pedagogy provided ready-made answers detached from local contexts. Masvotore calls for anthropological theology—one that centres cultural practices and lived experiences as valid theological sources. He supports Banana's vision of African theology as one rooted in the community's socio-cultural worldview.

However, the anthropological approach also has limitations. Cultural relativism poses a risk, particularly in Zimbabwe's diverse cultural landscape, making it difficult for the Church to adopt a single theological stance. Subjective interpretations may become dominant, and reductionism could erode the transcendental dimensions of theology. Without a balance between culture, scripture, and tradition, the anthropological model risks overemphasising experience at the expense of doctrinal coherence.

Beyond these intellectual debates, there are structural and political constraints. Decolonising theology may strain MCZ's relationships with global partners in the ecumenical community. Gondongwe (2011) notes that even before autonomy, Zimbabweans were brought into ministry partly for missionary advantage—they possessed better knowledge of the terrain than South African missionary assistants. However, their training preserved the supremacy of European theological perspectives. Despite these dynamics, MCZ has not prioritised theological debate in its highest decision-making body, the Annual Conference. Formerly, forums such as the *Ndhlela Lecture* provided space for theological engagement. In recent years, however, the Conference has focused on administrative and leadership concerns, sidelining critical theological issues that could shape the Church's future.

Ecclesiastical autonomy in 1977, the MCZ largely preserved a Western theological approach. According to Mujinga, this led to a theological rift that intensified during the 2008 socio-political crisis, prompting many believers to seek spiritual answers outside formal Methodist frameworks.

Masvotore (2024) asserts that theological training for ministerial training of ministers of religion in sub-Saharan Africa including Zimbabwe is not contextual hence it is not addressing African concerns. Masvotore (2019) argues that contextualisation of theology makes Christianity relevant in addressing real life issues that emanates from socio-cultural context. Contextualisation is evidence in the teachings of Jesus who used parables which were relevant to the day-to-day life of his audience. Jesus' approach helped people to get answers from their context. If asked a question he would throw back the question to the enquirer so that he or she will reflect from his or her understanding and will be told to go and do likewise.

This is different from the approach that was used by missionaries who came to Africa. They came to Africa with answers. It was like a doctor who starts by writing a prescription before examining the patient. Therefore, theological institutions are still being influenced by this western approach to theology. Students are just recipients of information which can only help them understand the western context. This approach does not help learners to develop critical thinking. This is not helpful in that the type of knowledge will not help in solving African spiritual challenges. When faced with spiritual challenges products of westernised theological institutions will turn to text books instead of getting answers from the context.

Masvotore advocates for Banana's contextualisation which is anthropological in approach. The first thing that is critical in this approach is to realise that God's redemption is universal. However, it is interpreted differently in various context. Hence Africans must be able to interpret God's redemption through the spectacles of their context. However, the anthropological approach to theology which emphasises the study of theology through analysis of human cultures and experiences have some challenges.

The first challenge is cultural relativism, cultures are diverse and complex, what is considered 'good' may be considered 'bad' in another culture. Considering the diversity in Zimbabwean cultures, it is difficult for the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe to come up with a theological standpoint that can encompass all the cultures within the country. The second challenge is of subjective interpretation, there is need to guard against personal feelings, opinions or biases. Dominant individuals' perspectives may end up being regarded as the absolute truth.

There are theological concerns caused reductionism whereby this approach may end up reducing theological concepts to purely human or cultural phenomena, overlooking divine or transcendent aspects. Human experiences may end up being overemphasized and focus will be more on human experiences and cultures while neglecting other sources of theology such as scriptures and tradition. Thus, while Masvotore raises pertinent issues, these challenges are not to be ignored.

Decolonisation does have some challenges and implications on the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's relationships with her global partners and the wider ecumenical community. The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's decolonisation process

may have started way back before 1977 autonomy when indigenous people were accepted into the ministry. However, this was not aimed at empowering the black Zimbabwean but was to the advantage of the missionaries. The missionaries, and their South African Black assistance had some limitations because they were not familiar with local knowledge of the religious and geographical terrain of Zimbabwe. Also, even though the Zimbabweans were accepted into the clergy, they were trained in a way that promotes white supremacy.

The major challenge is that theological issues are no longer discussed at the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe Annual Conference. The annual Conference is the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's highest decision-making gathering. The agenda now is strictly business. The agenda used to have a slot for what was called the Ndhlela lecture where various topical issues were articulated and decisions were, resolutions and recommendations were made. Annual conferences are now full of tension due to leadership positions. Theological issues have been pushed to periphery and yet it is theology that shape the faith of believers as well as church structures.

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe now faces the delicate but essential task of reconciling its colonial legacy with its present-day commitment to decolonisation. This process must be approached with intentionality, humility, and a clearly defined set of objectives. Decolonisation is not a simplistic exercise of rejection but a complex and multidimensional transformation that requires careful reflection and engagement with multiple perspectives. It involves listening attentively to the voices of those communities whose spiritual, cultural, and theological expressions were marginalised or suppressed by colonial ecclesial structures. The Church must openly confront its historical complicity in the erasure and vilification of African spirituality and religious expressions, acknowledging that evangelisation was at times entangled with cultural domination.

Reconciliation with the past

Reconciliation demands the creation of theological and institutional spaces where indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and spiritual practices can be voiced, validated, and critically engaged. Issues such as healing and deliverance, pilgrimage to sacred mountains, and the use of religious artefacts, such as anointing oil and blessed water, should be treated as serious theological concerns rather than peripheral or unorthodox practices. These elements are not merely cultural customs but integral aspects of many African Christians lived spirituality. The Church must engage them not with suspicion but with pastoral and theological sensitivity.

A cautious yet courageous movement towards embracing African religious worldviews may provide a foundation for a more holistic and contextually grounded theology. This does not entail romanticising tradition but rather integrating African cultural narratives, experiences, and epistemologies into the life of faith. Theology must reflect the dynamic, living faith of African communities, rooted in their stories, languages, and struggles, rather than relying solely on abstract or imported frameworks. The missionary model, which often universalised doctrine without regard for local particularities, must give way to a contextual theology that affirms the

plurality and fluidity of Christian expression. Theology is never static; it is a living discourse shaped by time, place, and people (Maluleke, 2021; Phiri, 2020). By rooting theology in Zimbabwean realities, the Methodist Church can enable African Christians to reclaim ownership of their faith, not as recipients of an external religion, but as participants in a redemptive narrative that speaks in their own voice.

4. Conclusion

The Study demonstrates that colonial legacies continue to shape the theology, structures, and practices of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe despite political and ecclesiastical autonomy. Through qualitative analysis, it shows that Eurocentric frameworks limit the development of an authentically African ecclesial identity. Emerging practices such as healing ministries and contextual liturgy indicate a shift toward indigenous theological expression, yet institutional resistance and structural constraints remain significant. The study highlights the need for deliberate theological reform, inclusive dialogue, and integration of African cultural and spiritual resources. Advancing decolonisation within the church may strengthen its relevance, credibility, and engagement with contemporary African realities while maintaining theological integrity.

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