


# The conquest of black African women: A collusion of church and coloniality in Africa

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**Dates:**

Received: 19 May 2023

Accepted: 25 Aug. 2023

Published: 31 Jan. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Ngcobo, S.L., 2024, 'The conquest of black African women: A collusion of church and coloniality in Africa', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(2), a9034. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.9034>

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The surge of the conquest of black African women grows rapidly as indicated by the multifaceted oppressions experienced by black African women today. Although coloniality is supposed to be a thing of the past, its stench still wreaks havoc for the present-day black African woman whose reality of experience is that of 'triple pain' (Vellem 2017). Colluding with the church, colonisers reinforced and justified the centralisation of the west in Africa, which was established through violence and consequently led to the conquest of black humanity. However, womanism has argued that it was black African women who, in addition to being conquered based on their race, were rigorously subjected to patriarchal violence. Today, the church has a prominent role in the lives of many black African women; thus the church has an integral responsibility of pursuing liberation of black African women and ultimately all humanity (Kobo 2018). Nevertheless, the church cannot move towards liberation without critiquing the toxic relationship between church and coloniality and its legacy of the conquest of black African women through patriarchal violence. Undoubtedly, many black African women continue to experience patriarchal violence to this day, and the church has many a time become the source of their suffering. This calls for a serious engagement within the liberation discourse to uproot colonial legacy of the conquest of black African women.

**Contribution:** The purpose of this article is to explore the relationship between the church and coloniality, and how this relationship has impacted the lives of black African women. Employing womanism as the primary framework, this article seeks to offer a womanist critique that seeks to disrupt the collusion of church and coloniality in its legacy of the perpetuation of patriarchal violence which leads to the conquest of many black African women today.

**Keywords:** black African women; colonialism; church; liberation; patriarchal violence; womanism.

## Introduction

The relationship between the Church and Africa is one marred by a long history of colonialism. Although the active period of colonisation lasted less than a century (Mudimbe 1988:14), its impact to black humanity and black women, in particular, was detrimental. Motivated by taking a closer look at this impact, this article seeks to explore how coloniality and church colluded in establishing and maintaining the conquest of black African women. It is worth noting that this article does not seek to romanticise Africa before colonial invasion, asserting the non-existence of the use of violence in an attempt to conquer anyone, including black African women. However, this article does not seek to negate the reality of the oppression and suffering brought about by colonialism. From a womanist stance, this article will explore the impact of the collusion of church and colonialism in conquering black African women. Womanism, according to Phillips in *The womanist reader*, is attributed to Alice Walker, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems. Although these three authors come from different contexts, Phillips (2006) asserts that '[e]ach of these authors developed the womanist idea and related terminology independently' (p. xx). Common to their respective theories on womanism is the idea of black women's lived experiences as sites of oppression where gender, race and class intersect. Because of womanism centralising black women's lived experiences as sites of struggle where sexism, racism and classism collide, womanism is the chosen framework applied in this article.

## The impact of Western grasp

The generic understanding of colonialism is that of Kramarae and Spender (eds. 2000) who describe colonialism as:

**Note:** Special Collection: Unthink the West, sub-edited by Fundiswa Kobo and Rothney Tshaka (University of South Africa).

[A] formal system of political dependency [which] is constructed by one country over people of a different ethnicity and also designates the political frameworks through which control is established and maintained. (p. 191)

While this definition captures the umbrella term of colonisation, it is not explicit about the aspect of conquest that is inherent in colonisation. Fragmentation, a concept expressed by Vellem (2007) and later expanded on by Kobo (2019), is one of the effects of suffering oppression due to colonisation. Coloniality was a violent, coercive, domineering, dangerous and imperial conquest, that disoriented, dislocated, dislodged and fragmented black humanity (Kobo 2019), and in this process, the identity of black women was eroded, more so than their male counterparts (Vellem 2017:7).

Alongside the imposition of colonialism was the use of the church to perpetuate and advance the Western grasp on Africa, its resources and people. The church of which I speak is a church understood in reference to Villa-Vicencio's (1988) ideology of a church whose missionaries of the gospel '... was linked to the ideology of British colonialism' (p. 44). That is to say, church is herein understood with its historical connection to British colonisation, wherein missions to colonise Africa were intrinsically linked to missions of the church. While colonialism is, in itself, a violent conquest entrenched in patriarchal violence, the Church too, as Botha notes, collaborated in mission with colonisers and contaminated with cultural eurocentrism the Good News of Jesus Christ (Botha 2011:5). In other words, the church could not claim innocence or be exempt from constituting and perpetuating patriarchal violence on black African women. When Lilian Siwila (2021) was reflecting on this toxic collaboration and relationship between the church and colonisers, she describes Mission and Colonialism as '... bedfellows that not only colonised and evangelised the continent but subjected the people of the continent to all forms of oppression' (p. 86). These bedfellows of church and colonisation have inflicted multiple forms of oppressions on Africa, with a specific focus on the oppression of black African women. The existence of patriarchal violence today is in itself viewed as a threat to black humanity and ultimately all humanity and therefore necessitates the emergence of a theological response that goes beyond critical analysis but engages in the liberative task of re-membering black African women, black humanity and ultimately all humanity (Kobo 2018).

## Divide, conquer and rule

It is essential to recognise that colonisation was not an accidental undertaking by the West. Although coaxed by the unassuming Latin term *colere*, meaning to cultivate or to design (Mudimbe 1988), from the onset, colonialists have been clear and intentional about conquering and assuming control of Africa. This historic encounter between Africa, as a continent to be divided, conquered and ruled by the West, and the West as an imperial force seeking to colonise, take

possession of Africa's wealth and stifle the pre-existing African ways of life, was sanctioned by the church (Hopkins 2012:3). Botha similarly observes the toxic relationship between Colonisers and the Church. Botha (2011) points out that:

Centuries on under colonialism, when European states took their turn in world domination, the church and the colonising state even collaborated in mission. The intermingling of colonialism and mission was a new phase of Christianity and empire. (p. 5)

When so-called 'Christian states', such as Portugal, Spain, France, England and Holland, were at the forefront of the slave trade, many Africans were uprooted from the continent of their birth, captured to be auctioned and sold as white people's possessions (Hopkins 2012:3-4). For black African women, this resulted in the Portuguese building Elmina castle in Ghana, which was both a slave trade fortress and colonial worship space, with a chapel nestled just above black African women's bodies (Nadar 2005). So abused were black African women's bodies, that they were not treated with dignity due to every human. Siwila (2021) puts an emphasis on this point, citing Pui-lan (2005) who posits that '... slaves were treated as property and "cattle" and slave women were coerced as breeders through rape, beating and other forms of violence' (p. 193). Thus, the wealth of these so-called Christian states was literally built on many black African women and men's bodies. While this evil was taking place in Africa, the church was actively taking part in perpetuating this violent act of oppression. The papal bull of 1455 commended Western leaders such as Prince Henry of Portugal for 'his devotion and apostolic zeal in speeding the name of Christ' and sanctioned the prince of Portugal to '... conquer and possess distant lands and their wealth' (Hopkins 2012:4). Even on these missions of African conquest '... both Catholic and Protestant clergy accompanied the slave vessels that went forth to do the work of Jesus in Africa' (Hopkins 2012:4).

One would expect that the gospel of Jesus is one that does not enslave or perpetuate violence, but during this era, we see Jesus and the gospel presented as tools of conquering, as opposed to empowering tools that could embrace Africa, take root in Africa and become hope-giving and life-affirming for African people. However, this was not likely, considering that initially, colonisers and the church held the view of an areligious Africa. That is to say, black African people were considered by Western colonisers to be without any religion, and even if religion was later acknowledged, it was deemed inferior and filled with 'primitive superstition' characterised by human sacrifice, evil witchcraft, black witchcraft, voodoo and cannibalism (Masondo 2018; Villa-Vicencio 1988). While the early church demonstrated through Paul's missionary journeys that Christianity did not have the pre-requisite of adopting the cultural norms of the evangelist, what Africa experienced was a message of Jesus presented as forsaking all that is intrinsic in Africa's worldview and adopt that which is alien and Eurocentric. Dividing, conquering and ruling black Africans was always at the heart of

the coloniser, and the church became instrumental in progressing the coloniser's goal. Iwe (1985, cited in Okon 2014) captures the breadth of colonisation well, highlighting it as a system characterised by:

[I]ntensive geographical explorations, the slave trade, the scramble for Africa, the territorial ambitions and pretensions of the Western nations, the imposition of alien rule and institutions, the planting of Western forms of Christianity, acculturation, racialism and exploitation ... (p. 193)

These experiences on black African women and men lead to black pain.

## Black pain and black African women

Vellem (2017) speaks intensively about black pain, which he understands as black humanity's response to racism and colonialism; it is a groaning pain for the dignity of the undermined black person (p. 1–2). For Biko (1978), black pain was the equivalent of suffering oppression mainly on the basis of being black. Likewise, Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) scholars such as Boesak (1977), Maimela (1986), Moore (ed. 1973) recognise the synonymity of being black and suffering oppression. Termed as 'situational blackness' (Boesak 1977), blackness within the BTL discourse, has less to do with the pigmentation of skin and more with the suffering and struggling against oppression. Reflecting on the black situation, Maimela (1986) states that:

[B]lack situation of racial oppression born out of a historical experience of suffering, of domination and humiliation of the powerless by the powerful racial group, which denies their fellow South Africans the right to become creators of their own history. It is born out of the awareness by blacks that they are not poor and oppressed by accident or by divine design. Rather, they are made poor, powerless, and that they are oppressed by another racial group, the rich and the socio-politically powerful whites. (p. 102)

Therefore, being black is a site of struggle, where one is forced into powerlessness, and having to take up a powerful stance of struggling against that imposed powerlessness. To have blackness so closely tied to suffering speaks to another form of conquering of black people, which is a conquering of the psyche, something which Black Consciousness (BC), through the writings of Biko (1978) and Cone (1999), was busy with.

Outside of Western imposition, being black did not have such close ties with suffering on the basis of one's blackness because Africa was in itself black, the black which typified beauty for the African peoples, as once again re-ignited by the slogans of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa, asserting that 'black is beautiful' (Biko 1978), and even awakened by the African diaspora, asserting that black is power (Cone 1999).

While BTL has captured the essence of black pain on the account of suffering oppression because of colonisation and racism, womanists are intentional in reflecting on the

comprehensive suffering of black humanity, that is a humanity constituted by black women and men. As early as 1994, Zodwa Memela was already dealing with the impact of racism on black women. Memela (1994) states that:

[I]t is almost impossible to speak of racism without speaking of sexism because of their inter-relatedness; as both of them are relational concepts, like any form of oppression. (p. 13)

Memela's assertion contends with the idea of speaking of racism, without encapsulating sexism as racism's interrelated oppressor. Itumeleng Mosala does not divorce sexism, classism and racism as forms of oppressions deserving of engagement in the pursuit of liberation for black humanity. In fact, Mosala (1988:4) asserts that Black Feminist Theology of liberation has 'emerged as a high priority on the agenda of Black Theology'. Mosala proves that BTL cannot be limited to only the two evils of racism and classism because sexism is as impactful on black humanity and is as critical to engage with theologically.

## Patriarchal violence

Sexism and patriarchy here in South Africa are not news. We see it in one of the earliest colonial encounters of a black African woman of Khoi descent, who in meeting with the Dutchman, Jan Van Riebeck at the tender age of 12, was conquered on the basis of being black, where she was forced to leave her people and move in to live and serve her colonial masters (Berger 2009:22). Krotoa would be subjected to classism, allowed to serve the colonial masters home while relying on her colonial master for livelihood. Simultaneously, Krotoa was being evangelised and converted, receiving a name change from Krotoa to Eva because of being given a westernised Christian message that converged eurocentrism into Christianity (Berger 2009:22). Krotoa's colonial situation forced her into the outskirts of the black community while she was a non-person in the white household in which she was forced to live. At the end, Krotoa died, rejected and isolated to Robben Island (Landman 1996), and ever since, black women are literally removed from their communities, hung on trees, killed on the streets, removed through human trafficking. Patriarchal violence is the language of the coloniser to continue to conquer African people.

According to Kanyoro (2001):

[P]atriarchy does not just mean the rule of the father, or the rule of males for that matter, but it carries with it connotations of an unjust hierarchical and dualistic ordering of life which discriminates against women. (p. 40)

The element of dividing, conquering and ruling black humanity through the collaboration of missionaries and colonisers was not only through physical fragmentation of the slave trade. Those who were left behind in the African continent also experienced black pain and black fragmentation. As observed by Oyerenke Oyewumi (1997), a Yoruba scholar, the goal for the evangelising and Christianising of the so-called 'heathens' in Africa was about transforming African societies and not preserving them

(p. 128). This means that all structures that operated within Africa became targets of conquest in order for Eurocentric structures to be imposed onto black humanity.

The fact that other parts of Africa, such as Western Africa, were known as 'white man's grave' (Oyewumi 1997:125) because of only a few Europeans being able to survive the environment, meant that the cooperation of the black person was necessary for colonisers and the church to survive. Both colonisers and missionaries were not going to be able to attain their goal of conquest and centring the West in Africa without coercing black humanity into servitude of the West's agenda of conquest. This need for creating black humanity as machinery to uphold Eurocentric principles had different nuances for black African women and men. In Oyewumi's thinking, patriarchy was a mechanism initiated in Africa, as a social system that organised black humanity by differentiating women and men (Oyewumi 1997). This was an implanted system, 'courtesy' of the church and coloniser. In this system, differentiation was applied as a hierarchical ordering of sexes, with the female sex regarded as inferior and subordinate to the male sex (Oyewumi 1997, ed. 2003). Applying this system distorted roles of women and men in Africa. This resulted in men occupying spaces only preserved for women and women occupied spaces now reserved for women. In disregarding the systems that existed before colonial encounter, the church and colonisers colluded in systematically destroying the role of African women and men. Kaunda and Nadar remind us that before the missionary era, black African women in the Bemba society held powerful positions that even superseded that of males. However, in the patriarchalisation of Africa by Christian missionaries and the church, women's roles were systematically destroyed as Christian missionaries promoted a message of women keeping silent in church, and men being vessels of having divine access (Kaunda & Nadar 2012:350). Black women thus still experience patriarchy, and it is a violent system that sacrifices black African women and black bodies. Men being the only ones able to occupy central roles in spiritual spaces meant that even God could only be conceptualised and expressed through the lenses of men. The God whom Christian scripture teaches created both women and men in God's image was now being '... interpreted through the perception of men who defined their own role, their own values, as well as those of the women within society' (Kaunda & Nadar 2012:349).

Patriarchy is not natural; it is a violent social construction that is anti the gospel message that affirms life for all humanity. Kumalo admonishes the missionary church, stating that '... [the church] did not address the issue of equality between men and women as taught by Christian theology' (Kumalo 2021:290). Kumalo (2021:291–292) notes how the church was all too eager to discuss frowned-upon issues pertaining to black African women, such as polygamy and bride-price, but the church failed to propose a theology that would immensely improve the role of women in church and society. Kumalo's assertions were not so much aimed at discussing these 'frowned-upon' issues, but they were

intended to show that the church was preoccupied with discussing women's issues, only in so far as it further perpetuated the conquest of black African women and men. The preoccupation of colonisers and the church in discussing the role of black women in the church and society was a prominent feature in discussions between colonised and coloniser. Kwok Pui-lan (2004) puts it thus:

The issue of gender featured prominently in the cultural debates between the colonizers and the colonized. The encounter between Western colonizing culture and indigenous cultures raised thorny issues pertaining to women's roles and sexuality, such as polygamy, child marriage, veiling, female circumcision, and widowhood. The subordination of women was often cited as symptomatic of the inferiority of indigenous cultures, and saving colonized women from their oppression, ignorance, and heathenism became an integral part of the colonialist discourse. Shuttled between tradition and modernity, indigenous women were seen either as victims of male aggression or as pitiful objects of Westerners' compassion. (p. 8)

Pui-lan raises a pertinent issue that of the subordination of women interwoven into the colonial discourse that inferiorised indigenous cultures in Africa. The view of black African women as objects to be saved from their 'oppression, ignorance and heathenism' (Pui-lan 2004) is interlinked with inferiorising black humanity at large. The concept of black African women needing to be saved was a colonial legacy apparent in western feminism. Unlike womanism, that does not relegate the struggle against racism and classism, the struggle against racism, classism and sexism are not of equal concern and are not equally emphasised in western feminism, a point well-articulated by Phillips' *The womanist reader* (2006). Western feminism ignored race and class, asserting a sisterhood, which is actually a sisterarchy that homogenises the positions of women worldwide (ed. Oyewumi 2003:3). Sisterarchy is Oyewumi's concept that women are linked together in a variety of unequal relationships in class, race and gender (ed. Oyewumi 2003:3).

Oyewumi's critique of feminism is framed within the interconnectedness of bedfellows of the church and colonisation, which are in collusion to conquer the black African women. Oyewumi (ed. 2003) says:

Feminism, like imperialism, discovered its social mission, which was global in scope, and like the white man's burden of the nineteenth century, the white woman's burden of the twentieth century was born. The burden, from these feminists' vantage point, entailed rescuing the exploited, helpless, brutalized, and downtrodden African woman from the savagery of the African male and from a primitive culture symbolized by barbaric customs. In their passionate zeal, it was inconceivable to some white women that there might be any society in the world in which women fare better than they do in the West. (pp. 28–29)

Patriarchal violence is deeply concretised by colonisation and the church today. Guided under colonisation, colonial evangelisation and colonial feminism, patriarchy not only relegates the place of women in society, but it does so for all black humanity. While colonisation as a legalised system is

understood to have ended, patriarchy unfortunately survived in Africa, and in the church, as colonial legacy.

The web of oppression through patriarchal violence induced onto black African women by the west also created men and women who could in turn oppress women (Kanyoro 2001:40). Patriarchy is the cross on which many black African women continue to die, and many black African men are in a perpetual position of servitude of a system that does not serve humanity. For as long as patriarchal violence persists in Africa, black African women will continue to be stripped of their agency and bear the image of the ones needing to be saved, saved from white men, white women and black men.

Oduyoye's outcry for black African women is immensely expressed as Oduyoye (1988) says:

The church offers up too many women on the altar of patriarchy. But there are women who consciously and deliberately stay with the church, struggling to live out the future in the oppressive present. Theirs is a living and life-enhancing sacrifice. (p. 51)

Black women that struggle to live out their future from the oppressive present are also in churches today. The church, which has a prominent role in the lives of many black African women, has an integral responsibility of pursuing the liberation of black African women and ultimately all humanity (Kobo 2018). We must acknowledge that the church cannot move towards liberation without critiquing the toxic relationship between church and coloniality and its legacy of the conquest of black African women through patriarchal violence.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, many black African women continue to experience patriarchal violence to this day, and the church has many a time become the source of their suffering. This calls for our serious engagement with the liberation discourse to uproot the colonial legacy of the conquest of black African women.

From a black theological and womanist perspective, true liberation for Africa means an Africa that is multiracial, multicultural and non-sexist. An Africa that is inclusive of women in all spheres of society. An Africa that embraces new voices with a prophetic vision of keeping Africa moving forward. While liberation of black humanity is the starting point, the ultimate goal, as many womanists have taught us, is the liberation of all humanity. The reconciled humanity of liberated women and men, where there are equal opportunities, equal merits, equal rewards and equal participation in leadership and any other spheres of society is our way of re-membering Africa as the centre in Africa.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

S.L.N. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical considerations

Because of the nature of the study, no ethical clearance was required for the article.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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