


# Ambivalence and the unsettling aftershocks: Postcolonial perspectives on Vellem's spirituality

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Addressing a myriad of complex social, economic and political issues in the South African context requires that we draw from a variety of voices. This postcolonial reflection draws on the work of Vuyani Vellem's African spirituality to highlight how it can help Africans conceptualise race epistemologically. The contribution emerged out of an article presented at a conference themed 'unthinking West'. The article employed the concepts of liminality and threshold to discuss the ambivalence encountered by Vuyani Vellem and highlights how his theological convictions still present unsettling ideological aftershocks within the unjust structures of society.

**Contribution:** This contribution is a black liberation theological reflection, which laments how Vellem did not live to witness the full realisation of his dreams regarding the liberation of the black masses. The article identifies racial discrimination and misconceptions on African spirituality as some examples of the 'unsettling aftershocks' regarding challenges, which Vellem confronted within the unjust structures of South African society.

**Keywords:** post-coloniality; liminality; threshold; race; African religiosity; Vuyani Vellem.

## Introduction

The South African context constantly brings the race debate to the centre of the existential realities of being black. Given the situation of racial discrimination, poverty and inequalities that are highly prevalent, we always have to conceptualise race in the light of what it means to be human because 'both meanings intersect epistemologically and phenomenologically...[and] "blackness" becomes both the concept and the embodiment of what race is and what it means to be human' (Woodson 2020:1). The existential realities of being black in the South African context, also begs the following question: What kind of spirituality can help Africans conceptualise race epistemologically so that blackness is embraced as an embodiment of the full realisation of what it means to be human? How did Vellem's understanding of Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) and African spirituality help him articulate the idea of 'unthinking the West'?

In answering the given question, this study employed the postcolonial lens and the notions of liminality and threshold (being in between spaces of transition) to discuss the ambivalence, which Vellem (born on 25 December 1968 and went to be with the Lord on 04 December 2019)<sup>1</sup> encountered. The study also highlights pointers for an African Spirituality, which reflect how his life and work still present unsettling ideological aftershocks within the unjust structures of society. Given that Vellem did not live long enough to see the fall of the oppressive and racial 'shitstems' (Jamaican slang for evil systems), which are still intact in some sections of the South African society today, the article argues that the concepts of liminality and threshold can assist us in framing approaches designed to address contextual challenges on racism, poverty, unemployment and decolonisation of the education system. Reflecting on the situation of poverty in South Africa Mpfu (2021b) observed that:

South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world; and this situation ... [remains] as 'a ticking time bomb' [as reflected in] recent unrest, looting and violence which took place in July 2021 following the arrest and imprisonment of former president Jacob Zuma after he failed to appear before the 'State Capture Commission. (p. 1)

1.Vuyani Shadrack Vellem born on 25th of December 1968 met his untimely death on the 04th of December 2019 after he battled cancer. In an editorial tribute in memoriam to Vellem, van Aarde and de Beer described him as a 'black prophet who refused to use Jesus and Biko to further his career. With great integrity he sought to wrestle with Jesus, in faith, from the black experience, and to grapple with Biko's black consciousness' (Van Aarde & De Beer 2019:1).

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

The unfolding developments in the country raise questions about how Vellem's African spirituality would have helped us to engage in black liberation theological reflections to challenge the status quo regarding the circumstances of the black majority who remain trapped in poverty. This contribution laments how Vuyani Vellem (2020) did not live to see the full realisation of his struggle as black theologian and activist who fought for the liberation of the black masses.

## Black Theology of Liberation

Vellems' work was grounded in BTL, which gained prominence in South Africa during the apartheid era as a response to the injustices and inequalities created by the white minority government to privilege white people. It is in that context that BTL emerged as 'a critical reflection on the praxis of Christian faith, one which participates in the ongoing process of liberation with the Black Christian community' (Goba 1986:60). As a response to apartheid, BTL inspired faith communities to confront the reality of oppression and exploitation of black people and mobilised them to take part in the struggle against oppression. Black Theology of Liberation is concerned about the lives of the black oppressed people and deals with life affirming theologies. In this regard, Vellem (2015a) described what it refers to as follows:

Generally speaking, the view that Black Theology is a theology of life derives from a particular understanding of the word or concept 'life'. Life is understood as the starting point of ethics, a precondition of all ethical claims or systems (cf. Petrella 2008:13ff.). God is thus understood as God of life and this understanding of life is not abstract but material bodily life. For example, Gustavo Gutiérrez says (2007:11) 'resurrection is the victory of life over death, while poverty means simply death. (p. 12-13)

Vellem clearly articulated that there is no system that should claim sovereignty over life because life is of God, and it is God who gave life to the world. This is the fundamental principle, which has become the pillar of ecumenical responses to the global challenges resulting in the exploitation of the poor. Therefore, BTL is a response to injustices in society and it emerged from the social realities, particularly the outcry and suffering of the oppressed (Pobee & Maluleke 2002:1105). As such, BTL provides a framework for life-affirming theologies and it is a theology of liberation and life.

In the years around 1970s, BTL emerged in South Africa as an inspiration for the student movement alongside the black consciousness, which was championed by Steve Biko and groomed leaders such as Mamphela Ramphele, Malusi Mpumlwana, Barney Pityana and others who played a major role in student leadership (Kobe 2018:291; Motlhabi 2009:162-180). Black Theology of Liberation was pursued as an independent project and developed through conferences and seminars with black theological groups (Motlhabi 1972:4 in Kritzinger 1988:60). Church leaders such as Boesak were inspired by the black consciousness movement and preached the gospel that encouraged black masses in South Africa to embrace their blackness as a gift from God.

For Biko, the liberation of blacks was achieved on two levels, namely psychological and physical. He saw the liberation of blacks as a process that began with their dignity and pride in being black amid oppression (Boesak 1977:9). During the 1980s, BTL was facing a paradigm shift. Young theologians returning from studying abroad began to interpret the existing Black Theology anew and built an academic foundation (Motlhabi 2009:169). Black people in South Africa continue to suffer racial discrimination, and the cause of their poverty is not only racism but also the dehumanisation in the form of sexism and classism. This trend marks a paradigm shift in BTL. The BTL was not only interested in the racism practised by the apartheid regime but also the logic of capital behind it. Racist policies and the resulting attitudes of white people were economic privileges they had obtained illegally and unjustly in South Africa. Kee (2008) described this stage as the third wave of BTL and argues as follows:

The third wave of Black Theology in South Africa can continue beyond the end of apartheid because its analysis of oppression is more profound than opposition to racism. It also includes an ideological edge that comes from a reading of Marx in addition to Black Consciousness. (p. 87)

He continues by arguing that BTL is rooted in the idea that oppression in the power structure of society is economic. In this regard, Mosala asserts that BTL in South Africa did not deal with it well. Mosala (1989:67) argued that the struggle for the liberation of black people was the starting point of the Black liberation movement. He did not simply advocate BTL's fight against racism, but also that liberation should be interpreted in terms of people's destiny, history, and materialism. In this regard, Kee (2008) diagnoses BTL and Mosala as follows:

Black Theology is not an end in itself- although it has brought tenure and security to some- but rather a means to a greater end, namely the establishment of communities of equity and justice. As theory it can achieve nothing, but as Marx notes, it can become a 'weapon' in the struggle when it is made available to the most oppressed classes. For Mosala, Black Theology in South Africa has not performed this function, because it has not been developed in association with 'black working-class people, the most exploited of the black community. (pp. 87-88)

Although Kritzinger (1988:75) described this phase as the *terminus a quo* (the earliest possible date for something), it can be evaluated to be a phase of preparation for a new phase of BTL. In 1990s, the ultimate academic purpose of BTL was unclear, but many black theologians continued to engage in politics. Therefore, for this period Motlhabi (2009:171) argues that '... [it] is quite elusive, if not in a paradoxical state of non-existence'. He also called this period of 'the theological wilderness' (2009:171). Although Kee describes the Black Theology of South Africa as a 'Redemption of the poor', he is also critical of this period (Kee 2008:71). The fall of the apartheid in the 1990s positively brought liberal democracy to black people, but on the negative side, it required a new paradigm shift for BTL, and that demand is an ongoing task. Therefore, this phase can be called the phase of a new leap.

Boesak (2019) recently drew a contrast between the lives of Biko and Vellem drawing on the concepts of 'Africanisation and Afrocentricity, colonisation, coloniality and decoloniality', and explored the question of whether a true Afro-pluralism is possible without a true African indigeneity. He concluded that like Biko, Vellem (2014) seems to have isolated spirituality from freedom, and for him spirituality, is:

[T]he symbol of liberation in South African public life... Just like Biko, Vellem believed that in order to maintain African Spirituality as a living, and vibrant aspect of black theology of liberation, we need to combat 'the internal logic of Western superiority and debunk it'. (p. 23)

## Colonial discourse: Understanding epistemology

The term 'colonial discourse' has been attributed to Edward Said who reworked Foucault's theory of discourse. Said employed Foucault to describe discourses, which delineates meanings and ideas and how they are formed or mediated and embodied in colonial epistemologies and cultural experiences as they are reflected in social behaviours. It was Said (1978) who coined the term 'Orientalism' and defined it as an organised collection of concepts and assumptions used by the West in evaluating culture and generating knowledge about non-Western peoples of the world. This approach generated new knowledge and complemented previous works on the economic and political logics of colonialism, as Said emphasised the existing link between power, knowledge and cultures (Carroll 2018:23; Robbins 1992:209).

According to Oelofsen (2015:131) 'decolonisation is the change that colonised countries go through when they become politically independent from their former colonisers'. Although decolonisation is more nuanced than this definition, it is often considered as a process of changing and reversing the effects of colonialism in the lives of the previously colonised communities. In the African context, decolonisation has been at the centre of religious activism and some of its articulations involve rejection of religious beliefs and practices imposed by colonial powers. This is where the contributions of Vellem have been noticeable and – 'unthinking the West' is at the heart of reclaiming African traditional and spiritual practices, which were undermined by the westerners and only practised on the liminal spaces.

## Liminality and threshold

Liminality and threshold are employed from a postcolonial lens to describe the situation of being 'in-between spaces' where people experience ambiguity when their lives shift from one cultural or economic stage to another. This can include race or economic transitions.

Threshold is the process which initiates a new stage in life, or having a new experience, as the phase of entering or something which is considered to be ideal.

Liminality on the other hand describes an experience of in-between and a phase of uncertainty (Broom & Cavenagh 2011) and is often used to identify qualities of transition or a state of being in between transitions. Embodied in the 'rites of passage' model, the concept of liminality has been used by different scholars to frame and conceptualise the experiences of young adolescents, including the medical studies exploring cancer.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this study, liminality refers to the transition and 'rite of passage' from the colonial oppressive practices to a transition where black communities can enjoy freedom and other rights. This transition often creates some ambivalence for the majority of black oppressed people who still experience racial discrimination. Therefore, the notion of ambivalence understands cultural identity as opposing perceptions and dimensions, which are at tension with each other. For example, Bhabha (1994) describes this ambivalence as:

[T]he duality that presents a split in the identity of the colonized other – allows for beings who are a hybrid of their own cultural identity and the colonizer's cultural identity. (p. vii)

Postcolonial theory studies and theorists approach liminality as employed by theorists to describe the situation of migrants when they are 'in-between spaces'. This study employs these concepts to underscore the ambiguities, which Vellem, experienced.

Liminality and threshold concepts have been widely explored in the context of justice and poverty in scholarly research. In general, scholarly research on liminality and threshold concepts in the context of justice and poverty highlights the ways in which social, economic and legal systems can create barriers to justice for marginalised individuals and communities. These two concepts best reflect the encounters, which Vellem had with Western notions of spirituality – hence his call for 'unthinking the West'.

*Liminality as resistance:* Liminal spaces and liminal practices within African religiosity can serve as a form of resistance against the colonial imposition. Liminal rituals and ceremonies provide opportunities for spiritual exploration, empowerment, and the reassertion of African cultural identity. These practices exist in the 'in-between' spaces, challenging the colonial binary of traditional versus modern, and creating new narratives that reflect African agency and worldview. For example, Nair (n.d.) engaged:

... with the notion of liminality as an artistic resistance to dominant, hegemonic constructions that propagate singularity of existence and expression ... [and observed that] Gender Studies, for example, could apply notions of liminality as an artistic resistance to study texts that address fixities regarding gender roles constructed by the heteronormative society. (p. 1)

*Reclaiming cultural autonomy:* In Vellem's notion of 'unthinking West', liminality becomes a powerful tool in the decolonisation process as it allows individuals and marginalised communities to reclaim their cultural autonomy

<sup>2</sup>For examples see: Marshall, Grinyer and Limmer (2019) and Schwartz and Glascoe (2020).



and assert their own spiritual practices and beliefs without being undermined by Western notions of spirituality. Through liminal rituals, Africans can reconnect with their ancestral traditions [these should be life affirming] and challenge colonial narratives, and assert their spiritual sovereignty in ways that appropriate blackness as an embodied racial reality. Such a task will require that we take BLT seriously.

*Liminality and cultural hybridity:* Liminal spaces also give rise to cultural hybridity, where different religious and cultural elements coexist and intersect. This hybridity can be seen as a form of resilience and adaptation, allowing African communities to navigate the complexities of post-colonial realities while maintaining connections to their ancestral roots. For example, Kameelah and Donald (2017:1) in their work *Black Transnationalism and the Discourse(s) of Cultural Hybridity: An Introduction*, highlighted how 'To be and exist as part of African Diaspora is increasingly synonymous with cultural hybridity'. Such hybrid encounters create ambivalence for African spirituality.

## Ambivalence and African spirituality

Ambivalence also refers to the experience of having conflicting or contradictory feelings or attitudes towards a particular person, object, or idea. It implies a state of uncertainty or mixed emotions, where one may simultaneously feel both positive and negative, or have competing desires or opinions about something. Ambivalence is a common human experience and can arise in various contexts, such as personal relationships, moral dilemmas, or societal issues. It often reflects the complexity of human emotions and the intricate nature of decision-making processes.

In our context, the idea of 'unthinking the West' invokes mixed feelings (*ambivalence*) especially among our generation of young people, as we have been raised to embrace all forms of Western epistemologies imposed on African communities through different forms of 'cultural imperialism'.

Our young people have mixed feelings about what to 'unthink' and what to embrace, and we need more reflections on this concept so that we can identify areas of ideological transformation towards the liberation of our minds. In dealing with ambivalence, at the threshold of his career Vellem (2017) observed:

This syndrome with subtle but all-pervasive racism, this woundedness, still hovers over all of us, especially those living on the underside of modernity, years and decades after the official collapse of colonial and apartheid regimes. (p. 2)

Considering that liminality is a state of transition that is often associated with rituals and ceremonies in African spirituality, this concept is applied in this study to highlight Vellem's experiences in his ministry and academic career where he fiercely confronted Western epistemologies, which undermined African values. Through the life of Vellem, liminality can be seen as means by which he sought to

achieve decolonisation as he engaged dominant colonial influence and exposed Western influence on African traditional and spiritual practices through his scholarly work on BLT. For example, this is how Vellem (2014) understood the impact of Western religiosity on African Spirituality:

The arrival of a salvationist, authoritative religiosity through Western Christianity in South Africa, in the company of a capitalist modernity, did not only dismantle and subvert the African indigenous dispensation of religiosity. It also sought to destroy it completely and arguably continues to do so in subtle forms in the 21st century, by attacking the imagination and consciousness of black Africans ... [and argued] that African religiosity as expressed in African Initiated Churches (AICs) is the site of the spirituality of liberation. (p. 1)

Employing the notion of *mokhukhu* – a shack – Vellem (2014) located 'the sanity of black Africans, the spirituality of liberation, black African agency and consciousness within the narrative of African religiosity' and concluded that African religiosity is 'a resource for an alternative civilisation and an important agenda in the current debates of the World Communion of Reformed Churches' (Vellem 2014:1). This is one example of liminal practices in African religiosity. This example resonates with African initiation rituals, which mark the transition from childhood to adulthood and involve a separation from ordinary life and a period of seclusion, during which initiates are taught traditional cultural values and spiritual practices. For Vellem (2014), the practices of African Indigenous Churches reflect a desire for rituals through which initiates are able to reject the dominant colonial culture and embrace their traditional African identity.

Another example of liminal practices in African religiosity is ancestor veneration, which involves the communication with and honouring (and not veneration) of ancestors. This practice allows individuals to connect with their ancestral roots and reject the colonial culture that seeks to erase traditional African spiritual practices. In both cases, liminality is a means of achieving decolonisation by rejecting the dominant colonial culture and embracing traditional African spiritual practices. By engaging in these liminal practices, individuals are able to connect with their cultural heritage and reject the legacy of colonialism:

The reality of the desire to dismantle the cultural dispensation of black Africans exists up to this very day. Although this desire by the West was initially fraught with physical, violent terror by dismembering and excluding black Africans from the communion of the Homo sapiens, today, we argue, this desire is more subtle and sophisticated. (Vellem 2014:4)

Coloniality is a plausible basis for believing that inclusive religious education means that all children should participate in Christian education learning, and I used (post)colonial discourse analysis to support this claim. According to Mignolo (1993:122), colonial discourse analysis is a literary historicism that aims to explain the dynamics of the colonial condition. Its purpose is to examine colonialism (and its

aftermath) critically in order to understand the effects of conquerors, imperial officials, travellers, and missionaries on the construction and operation of colonialism's ideology. It investigates the consequences of Western imperialism and how they are still felt today (coloniality).

Therefore, decoloniality is a concept framed and rooted in postcolonial theory and aims to challenge and subvert the enduring legacies of colonialism. It refers to a critical framework and a set of intellectual and political practices that seek to dismantle colonial systems of power, knowledge, and representation (Zembylas 2018). Considering that decoloniality recognises that colonialism has not only impacted material aspects of societies but has also shaped dominant discourses, ideologies and structures of knowledge production it is important to reflect on Vellem's notion of 'unthinking West as it calls for the deconstruction of colonial epistemologies and the reclamation of alternative ways of knowing and being that challenges the hegemony of coloniality in our understanding of Spirituality.

## Race and whiteness

The notion of race takes different forms in different contexts. For example, it can be a biological, historical, political, or cultural although most scholars agree that this is socially constructed. In this article, race is approached as 'a concept that signifies and symbolizes socio-political conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies' (Winant 2001:317). According to Lindner (2018:44):

The concept of race is socially constructed, developed over centuries partially as a method of social control (McIntosh 2007:349). Science has shown that race is not biological, but merely an ideology based upon superficial value judgements (Painter 2010:2). The term white[ness] refers most obviously to light skin, but also denotes those who historically have benefitted from light-skin privilege ... Clifford Leek (2014) notes that whiteness can be defined 'as a set of practices that function to protect and maintain privilege, while others defined whiteness simply as the experience of privilege' (2014:214). Both definitions are necessary; however, even those who acknowledge their whiteness often do not recognize the ways in which it protects privilege, which is one way in which whiteness becomes problematic. Indeed, even 'seemingly "benign" practices of whiteness reinforce white supremacy'. (p. 215)

The Webster (n.d.) dictionary explains that threshold is the process of:

[S]tarting a new stage in your life, or having a new experience, the place or point of entering or beginning' and a level, point, or value above which something is true or will take place and below which it is not or will not. (p. 1)

For example, it can be used to describe the transition for young people who are 'on the threshold of their careers'. For purposes of this study, the word threshold is employed alongside liminality to highlight the transition from colonial and racial struggles through to an ideal of a society that is free from racial and colonial oppression. The study contends that this transition is still at:

[T]he place or point of entering or beginning' and 'a level, point, or value above which something is true or will take place and below which it is not or will not. (Webster n.d.:1)

## Vellem and African spirituality

In African spirituality, liminality refers to a state often marked by ritual practices or ceremonies that create a sense of separation from the ordinary life and prepare the individual for a new status or social position. In this contribution, one of the arguments made is that Vellem anticipated a new social and economic order which he never witnessed in his lifetime and that created ambivalence as he always hoped for a transition which improved the conditions of the black South Africans. As Scott (2020) also observed:

A liminal phase is one of ambiguity or a stage between two situations or statuses (Cilliers 2010:344, also cf. Barnard 2010; Turner 1995). In essence, liminality is a phase in between a certain structure and a new structure, meaning it is essentially an anti-structure in which a transition happens. (p. 2)

In his 2014 publication titled: *Spirituality of liberation: A conversation with African religiosity*, Vellem (2014:8) underscored his idea that African religiosity is a transformative resource for an alternative civilisation. Talking about *umoya* [*spirit*], Vellem (2017) had this to say:

Umoya is rising against a self-serving periodisation of world history ...

Umoya of life is on the rise ... the spirit of justice, power ... the gift and power of life ...

Umoya is rising, in the spirit of forgiveness, coaxing and persuasion without forgetting the devaluing and suppression of the black people.

Umoya is the creative participation of black people with dignity as architects of life with God ... (p. 8)

Through his notion of 'unthinking West' (2017), Vellem advanced the idea that 'BTL needs to unthink the west by focusing on and retaining African spirituality as a cognitive spirituality'. For Vellem (2017:1), cognitive spirituality means a 'combination of faith and reason'. This African religiosity is a transformative and life-giving theology, which counters the cultural imperialist movement that imposed Western values on Africans. In the face of ambivalence, we can embrace African spirituality and values without losing our Christian identity. Such practices include among others: burning incense, beating of the drums and taking natural herbs for ailments, which are known to be curable at home without consulting medical practitioners who often charge exorbitant fees, which are not affordable to most African people.

As part of suppression of indigenous religiosity, colonial powers often sought to eradicate or marginalise indigenous African religions, considering them as primitive or pagan. As a result, many African societies experienced religious syncretism, where traditional beliefs and practices were blended with elements of Christianity or Islam. This process disrupted the continuity of indigenous religious traditions and eroded their cultural significance.

Therefore, Vellem's (2017) views present a liberative and transformative approach to help us 'unthink' ideas from African values and practices, which have been considered 'barbaric' by the West. Whether it is the spiritual practices, cultural values or education system, reclaiming the agency of African indigenous knowledge systems has the potential to help us decolonise the systems.

## African religiosity presents alternatives

In one of my contributions 'Pursuing fullness of life through harmony with nature: Towards an African response to environmental destruction and climate change in Southern Africa', (Mpofu 2021a), I highlighted how African communal life presents a potentially constructive eco-theology in order to help us address climate change challenges. This contribution proposed that we take human relations with nature seriously and drew on the notions of 'cultural landscapes' and 'eco-theology' to underscore the significance of the African worldview in addressing the disharmony that has been created by excessive exploitation of natural resources. The thesis of this contribution was that '...nature has become violent with humanity, because humanity has been violent with nature'. (Mpofu 2021b:8)

In order to maintain harmony in creation, humanity should seek to live respectfully not just with one another, but with all living things – both those that are seen and those that are not seen.

African religiosity, as articulated in the African worldview, takes human relations with nature very seriously. In Africa, life is understood through the concept of 'ubuntu' [humanity], which places emphasis on 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' – which literally means 'a person is a person because of other people'. This construction considers individuals within a community as a collective. People are not viewed as individuals, but individuals who are in relationship with their community and the world around them. This approach places emphasis on collaborative unity between humanity, spirituality and the material world (nature) as highlighted by Foster (2010):

[T]he essential unity between self and others, as well as the self and the entire Kosmos, is a vitally important aspect in relating the African world view to an integrated approach to consciousness. (p. 82)

Reflecting on the work of Vellem (2014); Kobe (2021) also observed that:

Ubuntu is the spirituality of liberation that BTL needs to advance as one of its interlocutors. This research work will consult the literature emerging from African philosophy, ethics, spirituality and BTL arguing that Ubuntu is an indigenous philosophy, spirituality that continues to exist in the languages and culture of the Abantu (Bantu) speaking people.

By recognising 'ubuntu' as a spirituality of liberation, Vellem (2014) approached the liminal and threshold spaces in

'African philosophy, ethics, spirituality' and advanced BLT as scholars towards creating more equitable and inclusive justice systems, which decolonise and dismantle systems of colonisation. Although he was clear about the agenda and the role of BLT in decolonisation, this agenda was riddled with ambivalence as his critics treated him with suspicion.

While ambivalence primarily relates to individual experiences and emotions, decoloniality operates at a broader socio-political level. However, there can be a connection between the two when examining the ambivalence that arises within individuals or communities navigating the complexities of decolonial projects. Decoloniality often requires confronting deeply ingrained ideologies, questioning dominant narratives, and challenging power structures that have been internalised. This process can evoke ambivalence as individuals and communities grapple with the tensions between familiar norms and values inherited from colonial legacies and the aspirations for decolonial transformation.

When considered through the life and work of Vellem, ambivalence presents a broader discourse on decoloniality, which remains relevant to contemporary challenges experienced by the poor black South African communities. While decoloniality aims at challenging and disrupting the postcolonial injustices and structures, which remain intact, it is important to mention that, like BTL, it remains a non-monolithic framework, which has not been universally embraced. Consequently, there are diverse perspectives and some debates generate tensions, which lead to ambivalence and different views regarding approaches, strategies, and goals of decolonisation.

## Conclusion

This study interrogated how Vellem conceptualised race through the notion of 'unthinking the West' so that blackness is embraced as an embodiment of the full realisation of what it means to be human. In addressing the given question, the study employed the postcolonial lens and the concepts of liminality and threshold to discuss the ambivalence, which Vellem encountered and also highlighted pointers for an African spirituality that reflects how his life and work still present unsettling ideological aftershocks within the unjust structures of society.

The contribution observes that Vellem did not live to see the full realisation of his dreams regarding the liberation of the black masses and taught us to embrace African religiosity by focussing on and retaining African spirituality as a cognitive spirituality. Although he did not live to see total emancipation of the black masses, Vellem would have articulated this African religiosity with creative vigour to help us address the challenges of Western consumerism, excessive exploitation of natural resources, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), unemployment, poverty, and other challenges affecting the poor. In keeping up with his legacy, we should remind ourselves that it is good to be African, and it's okay to celebrate our values and heritage.



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## Author's contributions

B.M. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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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, and the publisher.

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