

# The Decolonising content of African Theology and the Decolonisation of African Theology

Reflections on a Decolonial future for African Theology

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## Abstract

This article offers an analysis of the decolonising content of selected African Christian theologians, namely; Kwame Bediako, John Mbiti, Jesse Mugambi and Mercy Oduyoye. Given their self-conscious and deliberate critique of western and missionary theologies, these African theologians were not only in the vanguard of theological decolonisation but also initiated a species of post-colonial African theology. Given the limitations of these theologies and on the basis of the African critique of the myth of postcoloniality, contemporary critiques of postcolonialism and recent calls for the decolonisation of theology and theological education in Africa, this contribution argues for the significance of the decolonial epistemic perspective in African Christian theology. In charting a decolonial trajectory, the article further highlights possible challenges which decolonial imagination may pose to a traditioned discipline such as theology.

**Keywords:** African agency, African Christian identity, African Christian theology, African theological education, coloniality, decoloniality, epistemological decolonisation

## 1. Introduction

This article argues for the significance of the decolonial epistemic perspective in African Christian theology. As part of an ongoing project at the University of the Western Cape on “The Trinity in African Christian theology”, this contribution will ponder the question to what extent African theology embodies a decolonisation of western value-setting in Christian theology and epistemologically grounds African agency. Heeding Maluleke’s (1997:5) caveat that African theologians take careful note of “the ground already captured” in African theological discourse before hastily making new proposals, this contribution offers an assessment of the decolonising content in the theologies articulated by some of Africa’s most influential and prolific theologians, namely; John Mbiti (b. 1931), Kwame Bediako (1945-2008), Jesse Mugambi (b. 1947) and Mercy Oduyoye (b. 1934). The rationale for the

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choice of these theologians is threefold. First, their respective contributions are arguably both formative and representative of specific strands of African theology, namely; the African theologies of inculturation, translation, reconstruction and African women's theology respectively. Secondly, all of them developed their theologies in close relation to African churches of missionary origins which makes them good case studies for incipient decolonial thought in African theology. Thirdly, their contributions are significant for African systematic theology understood broadly as African theological reflection on Christian doctrine.

There have been protracted debates on the definition, nature, task and distinctiveness of African theology (Bujo, 1992:63; Mbiti, 1976a, 1980:119; Mugambi, 1989:9; West, 2016:349). In this contribution, I deploy the phrase African theology as an umbrella for academic African Christian theologies understood as theological reflection on the interplay between Christian tradition and the African religious-cultural heritage including contemporary experience. Further, the terms Africa and African will refer to the geographical region known as sub-Saharan Africa and to peoples indigenous to this region respectively. This distinction is crucial given its analytical weight and the debates on the "geo- and body politics of knowledge" (Mignolo, 2007:453).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, without underplaying conceptualisations of identities as "complex and multiple" (Appiah, 1992:178) or indeed of "black consciousness" as a reflection of a "mental attitude" rather than "a matter of skin pigmentation" (Biko, 2017:52), the African of this research is the black African. This is a self-conscious move to take seriously my locus of enunciation or what feminist scholars call positionality.

The argument of this article for decoloniality as the future of African theology is articulated in several steps. The first offers a brief overview of the emergency of African theology. This is followed by an analysis of the decolonising content in the theologies of the four African theologians mentioned above. Given the decolonial limitations of their theologies, the subsequent step argues for decoloniality as a new paradigm for contemporary African theology in all its variants. This is crucial given the significance of decoloniality<sup>3</sup> as an analytical category to give expression to the continuity of coloniality and its manifestation in the academy in general and in theological education in particular. Following Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012:48), I take coloniality to be that "invisible power structure that sustains colonial relations of exploitation and domination long after the end of direct colonialism". The final

<sup>2</sup> For philosophical discussion on conceptualisation of Africa and African see Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the various understandings of the term decolonial, see Maria Lugones' (2017) entry on "Decolonial" in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* edited by Vargas, D. R., La Fountain-Stokes, L., and Mirabal, N. R.

step highlights some of the challenges which African theology as decolonial episteme may encounter particularly with reference to African theological reflection on Christian doctrine otherwise understood as systematic theology. Given the implication of the argument of this article, namely; the foregrounding of African theological agency and de-linking of theology from the logic of coloniality, this research contributes to the discourse on decoloniality in African theology and to missiological debates on the relevance of theology for the transformation of African societies.

## 2. The Emergence of written African Theology

Since the mid-19th century, academic (written) forms of academic African Christian theology (hereafter African theology) emerged as self-consciously contextual theologies. This was a further development given other forms of African theology at the time, namely; oral (grassroots) theology and symbolic theology (Mbiti, 1980:119). Traditionally, African theology has been categorised in terms of several hermeneutic orientations, namely; inculturation, liberation, translation, and reconstruction. Maluleke (1997:17) adds to this list African charismatic and Pentecostal theologies, and the theologies of African Independent Churches (AICs). According to the South African biblical scholar Gerald West, the lines between various African theologies are currently blurred. Thus, to transcend such distinctions, West (2016:355) argues that “all Africa’s African theologies are liberation theologies.” I suggest that speaking of variants remains helpful for analysing hermeneutical orientations of African theology.

Given the Western denigration of African culture and religion, the early phases of academic African theology were characteristically apologetic. Ironically, it was Placide Tempels’ *La Philosophie Bantoue (Bantu Philosophy)*, a book with an obvious colonial orientation, that became a pioneering text among writings that valorised African thinking against dominant Western scholarship which denied the very possibility of an African religion, philosophy or theology (Sakupapa, 2012:425). Despite Tempels’ portrayal of Africans as objects to be analysed and understood and his apparent contribution to the cult of difference, his book inspired critical reflection among African theologians most notably Vincent Mulago who appropriated and reinterpreted what Tempels called a bantu philosophy of life, namely; vital force (Bujo 1992:55). Geoffrey Parrinder’s *African Traditional Religion* (1954) was another text written by a western thinker that nevertheless contributed to a new orientation towards the assertion of the legitimacy of African traditional religions. As a separate category of study, African Traditional Religion (ATR) was first introduced by Parrinder during his tenure at the University College Ibadan in Nigeria. In francophone Africa, *Des prêtres noirs s’interrogent (1956), a publication by Black Priests, marked a watershed in the development of an African theology by*

*Africans.* The classic debate on theological method between the Congolese Bishop Tharcisse Tshibangu (a student at the time) and Alfred Vanneste then President and Dean at the Faculté de théologie catholique de Kinshasa is especially instructive on theological developments in Francophone Africa (Bujo, 1992:55-61).

In Anglophone Africa, John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu, amongst others, contributed to the emergence of academic African theology given their publications on the legitimacy and significance of ATR for Christian theology. As Christian theologians and church men, they were concerned with the theological significance of the pre-Christian African religious heritage. As the late Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako (1994:15) argued, theirs was a “self-consciously Christian and theological” effort “aimed at clarifying the nature and meaning of African Christian identity”. For Mbiti (1970a:431), a theologian who is widely recognised as a leading figure of modern African (Anglophone) theology, this was also driven by missiological considerations, namely, to “deepen Christianity at the point of African religiosity”. Mbiti (1969:232) had long recognised that mission Christianity “was not from the start prepared to face a serious encounter with the traditional religions and philosophy”. Given the theological and missiological impetus of their work, Mbiti (1972:52) and several other African theologians soon came to regard ATR among the sources of theological reflection yet without denying the universal character of the gospel. Having developed in close connection to issues in the social context, African theology has come to be defined in terms of its hermeneutical orientations as inculturation, liberation, translation and reconstruction theologies.

### **3. The Decolonising Content of African Theologies: A decolonial analysis**

Given the methodological and hermeneutical innovations of African theologians of Mbiti's generation, their theological reflections were an embodiment of incipient attempts at theological decolonisation.<sup>4</sup> Even though the term decolonisation<sup>5</sup> was more popularly deployed as a geopolitical notion to describe the ending of European colonial rule [in the colonies] and the subsequent emergence of the post-colonial regimes (Sakupapa, 2017:102), political decolonisation had domino effect on churches in Africa. This is evident in the emergence of African theology and the cognate attempts by African theologians and churches to rid Christian theology and

<sup>4</sup> For some thinkers, it was the African Initiated Churches that may be rightly described as incipient attempts at theological decolonisation given the various ways in which they were hitherto hailed as movements for “spiritual decolonization”, “the avant-garde of African Christian authenticity” (Adriaan Hastings), and “signs of African authenticity” (David Barrett).

<sup>5</sup> The term was first coined by a French journalist Henri Fonfrède in his 1836 tract “Decolonization of Algiers”.

faith of unwarranted influences from its western expressions and missionary heritage (Kalu, 2003:270). The continental protestant ecumenical body, namely; the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) played a crucial role in this regard. One of its earliest initiatives was a Theologians' Consultation held in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1966 at which several African theologians discussed the question of a relevant theology for African churches.<sup>6</sup> The second General Assembly of the AACC held in Abidjan (1969) recommended some guidelines on African theology as a follow up to Ibadan 1966 (Sakupapa, 2017:129). The AACC's next Assembly at Lusaka (1974) issued a moratorium on the receiving of money and personnel from abroad thus, expressing "the desire by churches in Africa to break the old pattern of church leadership dominated as it were by Western missionaries" (2017:110). Germane to this emerging concern with decolonisation among churches were analyses of the complex relationship between mission and colonialism in general and of the role played by missionary Christianity in the facilitation and retention of the spectres of colonialism. The latter found expression in the missionary dissemination of Christianity as a civilising mission and was subsequently bequeathed more widely in African societies through the medium of western education. In what follows, I explore whether or not the theologies of Mbiti, Mugambi, Bediako and Oduyoye as self-consciously contextual represent incipient attempts at decolonisation of theology. This analysis is an affirmative response to Maluleke's (1997) call intimated in the introductory section of this article.

#### **4. John Mbiti: African Traditional Religion as a preparation for the gospel**

Mbiti, whose formative contribution to African theology has been discussed above, reflects a deep concern for African theological consciousness rooted in African religious-cultural realities. While this is not the place to account for the various terminologies used in African theology to give expression to the relationship between gospel and culture, suffice it to note that Mbiti found it necessary to distinguish between Christianity as a social and cultural embodiment of the gospel and the gospel itself. In his view, we "can add nothing to the Gospel, for this is an eternal gift of God; but Christianity is always a beggar seeking food and drink, cover and shelter from the cultures and times it encounters" (1970a:438). If so, Mbiti found it inappropriate to illustrate the relation between Christianity and culture with the concept of indigenisation given its underlying assumptions about "Christianity as a ready-made commodity which simply had to be transplanted to a local area" (cited in Bediako, 1995:117). Following Mbiti,

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<sup>6</sup> The edited volume *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (1969) was one of the significant outcomes of this consultation.

Bediako (1995:116) contends that it is the inability to make this distinction that some African theologians are “haunted by the foreignness of Christianity, and having started from that foreignness”. Although the distinction Mbiti makes may be interpreted as a decolonising surge naming and exorcising eurocentrism in the transmission of the gospel (Bediako, 1996:25), it is nevertheless problematic. As Maluleke (2000:10) argues, it is a “fantastic dualism” contrary to the African’s experience of missionary Christianity in both its past and present forms.

Mbiti’s stature as a formative and leading African theologian may be traced to his seminal ideas regarding the continuity between the African religious experience and Christianity. His version of the continuity thesis first found expression in works on African religion and philosophy (1969), eschatology (1971) and most pointedly in his study of *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970b). Mbiti (1969:29) claimed that the nearly 300 African people whose concepts of God he analysed shared “a notion of God as the Supreme Being”. Mbiti accordingly opined continuity between the Supreme Being of pre-Christian African religions and the God of Christian proclamation. Nevertheless, Mbiti (1979:68) affirmed Jesus Christ as the new element that Christianity introduced into the African religious experience. If so, what is the relation between ATR and Christianity? Using continuity as a hermeneutical principle, Mbiti (1969:277) portrayed ATR as a preparation for the gospel (*praeparatio evangelica*). Even though Mbiti (1970a:436) argued that ATR can enrich Christianity, African religiosity finds its fulfilment in Christianity. In this regard, Mbiti ascribed ATR heuristic value.

Mbiti’s approach was critiqued by African evangelical theologians such as Byang Kato who instead argued for the discontinuity between ATR and Christianity “for the sake of alleged doctrinal orthodoxy” (Conradie & Sakupapa, 2018:43). A different critique came from the Ugandan poet and scholar Okot p’Bitek who argued for discontinuity for the sake of decolonisation. p’Bitek (2011) labelled proponents of the continuity thesis as intellectual smugglers who instrumentalised and indirectly posited an inferior status to African religion. If so, isn’t African theology itself in need of decolonisation?

While appreciative of Mbiti scholarship for demonstrating that African people were “not religiously illiterate”, p’Bitek (2011:22) was nevertheless critical of Mbiti’s reinterpretation of African deities in Christian categories. For p’Bitek (2011:21) took issue with the African Christian theological interpretation of African deities in terms of the Christian God. Chitando (2006:104) highlights the significance of p’Bitek’s critique to illustrate the limitations of African theological appropriation of ATR. In Bediako’s (1999:4) analysis, what p’Bitek’s critique puts under scrutiny is the “validity of applying Christian theological categories to the elucidation of African religious experience”. For Bediako (1994:16), African theology is more accurately

judged by its own 'primary theological purpose' than by any extraneous criteria". Such an argument affirms the explicit Christian theological and missiological commitment of African theologians in their reinterpretation of ATR.

Even if the importance of this African philosophical and intellectual critique of Christian scholarship on African religion and theology is recognised (Bediako, 1999:438; Maluleke, 1998:131), the decolonial challenge that it poses has not been sufficiently engaged in African theology. As Conradie and Sakupapa (2018:44) argue, p'Bitek's critique "may well serve as a launch pad for an even more radical decolonial critique of Christianity as a colonising religion." On this point, Wiredu's (1998:20) view is instructive, namely; that African scholars trained in western modes "think about and expound their own culture in terms of categories of a colonial origin without any qualms as to any possible conceptual incongruities". Arguably, while first generation African theologians indicated lines of continuity between Africa's religious past and the Christian faith, far less attention was paid to the underlying discontinuities. Conradie and Sakupapa (2018) illustrate this concern with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity in African theology.

Another critique of Mbiti's theological valorisation of ATR has to do with a unitary essentialising approach to African identity encapsulated in his claim that "Africans are notoriously religious" (1969:1). Mbiti (1969:15) describes African religiosity as an "ontological phenomenon". According to Platvoet and Van Rinsum (2003:135), this claim is a "post-colonial counter-invention against the pre-colonial and colonial European inventions of Africa as primitive, savage, without religion, pagan, superstitious". However, for all that this 'post-colonial' invention is worth, it tends towards cultural romanticism and essentialism.

## **5. Jesse Mugambi: Re-mythologisation as key to reconstruction**

If Mbiti valorised ATR, the Kenyan theologian Jesse Mugambi shares a theological appreciation for the African Religious Heritage (ARH). Mugambi (1989:138) has consistently argued for the need to ground African theological reflections on African conceptual assumptions and resist western intellectual hegemony and the African epistemological dependence on "North Atlantic" theology (2003:1-31). Little wonder that Mugambi (1989:139) conceives of the classical creeds of Christendom as both dated and unintelligible to the African Christian apart from the theological context in which they arose. For Mugambi (1989:133), the presuppositions underlying classical Christian doctrinal theology must be re-examined from the perspective of African thought. Mugambi concretised his consistent call for African theologians to publish by establishing a publishing house, namely; Acton Publishers, which focuses on African scholarship thus offering a great service to theological scholarship in Africa.

Although Mugambi has written widely on several themes including ecumenism, hermeneutics, environmental responsibility, and salvation amongst others, in his early publications, he delineated liberation of the African from all forces that hinder fullness of life as the goal of African Christian theology (1989:12). A major shift in his understanding of the task of African theology is elaborated in his proposal in 1990, of an African theology of reconstruction as the new paradigm of African theology. Therein, Mugambi (1995:37-38) deployed the idea of the re-mythologisation as key to reconstruction thus locating the theological significance of ARH as the basis for reconstruction (2003:52). As the 20th century nears its end, Mugambi (1995:37) argued, “Africa must begin to make new myths, and re-interpret old ones, for the survival of its own peoples”. This idea had decolonial potential which Mugambi could have elaborated upon. Another area with potentially rich decolonial insights is his discussion of aesthetic reconstruction as involving “an appreciation of the values upon which a society is founded” (2003:49). However, Mugambi’s theology of reconstruction may be critiqued for its “prescriptive haste” (Katongole, 2011:32) and for moving away from the particularism of Christian faith communities to “appeal to the agency of the elite” (Heaney, 2015:172). This is evident in the concrete proposals that follow his discussion of the various levels of reconstruction (Mugambi, 2003:43, 45, 50, 56). The challenge of moving away from the particularity of context is also evident in Mbiti. For instance, while Mbiti’s (1971:24) study of the relationship of biblical eschatology to the Akamba thought found that “the linear concept of time is virtually non-existent” among the Akamba, he went on to universalise the two-dimensional African concept of time derived from Akamba thought to the rest of Africa.

## **6. Mercy Oduyoye: A vision of inclusivity**

In the works of the Ghanaian theologian and mother of African women’s theology, Mercy Oduyoye, we find an unambiguous stress on the experiences of women as forming part of the data for theological reflection. Nevertheless, similar to Mbiti and Mugambi, Oduyoye (2001:39; 2000:60) shares the view regarding the significance of the “primal religion of Africa” (i.e. ATR) for African theology. Oduyoye (2001:25; 1993:50-65) problematizes the constructions of African identity articulated by male African inculturation theologians. Without denigrating African culture, Oduyoye (1994:173) locates the seeds of the objectification, domestication and marginalisation of women in African religio-cultural heritage. This approach has found expression in Kanyoro’s (2002) gendered cultural hermeneutics. Oduyoye’s (1995:89) critique extends to liberation theology for neglecting gender issues given its focus on structural analysis of injustices. She constructively deploys the notions of household of God and family as liberative metaphors to articulate an

African ecclesiology (2005). In light of the African sense of community infused with a theological understanding of *koinonia*, Oduyoye (2001:85; 2005:151) opines an ecclesiology of inclusivity in which both men and women exercise their gifts at all levels within the church. Oduyoye (2000:122) and other African women theologians associated with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians have thus variously critiqued patriarchy, androcentrism and sexism in both church and society in Africa and opine inclusive visions of being church. It is to Kwame Bediako's theology that I now turn.

## 7. Kwame Bediako: Christianity as an African's Religion

Kwame Bediako's (1999:1) key contribution to African theology may be located in his argument that identity was a theological category in the attempt by African theologians of Mbiti's generation to articulate the relationship of the Christian faith to the religious traditions of Africa. This was the burden of his important study *Theology and Identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and in modern Africa*. Therein, Bediako juxtaposes how second-century Christian theologians confronted the issues posed on Christian identity by the Greco-Roman past and the 20th century African Christian theologians' engagement with the African pre-Christian past. According to Bediako (1995:5), African theologians were concerned with a basically *religious* problem, namely; "making room in the African experience of religious powers for Christ". Their efforts thus led to the "Christianisation of African tradition" (Bediako, 1999:10).

By affirming Mbiti's portrayal of the significance of the gospel in Africa as the fulfilment of African religion, Bediako too reduces ATR to its usefulness as a preparation for the gospel. Nevertheless, his deployment of the theological notion of translation as a description of the universal character of gospel contained seeds of decolonial thought. Following the lead of Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh, translatability in Bediako's (1995:119) theology refers to "the capacity of the essential impulses of the Christian religion to be transmitted and assimilated in a different culture". It signifies a basic openness of the gospel and of its "relevance and accessibility" to all cultural expressions. Bediako underscores how the translation of the bible into African vernacular languages served as a bridge to the traditional African world-view. While linguistic translation was by no means an innocent endeavour, the value of translation theologies lies in its capacity to foreground African agency in telling the story of the African encounter with missionary Christianity. Therefore, following Sanneh, Bediako (1995:121, 206) argues that the growth of Christianity in African societies must be attributed to indigenous assimilation and African religious agency rather than historical missionary transmission. Christian identity in Africa has thus taken on "non-western" forms and Christianity has now become an

African's religion. The decolonising impetus of translation notwithstanding, it has limitations for thorough-going theological decolonisation. As Maluleke (1996:9) argues, the "very fact that we speak of orthodoxy in Christian theology is proof that the translation logic can be arrested – for centuries at least".

Cognisant of critique of Okot P p'Bitek's critique of African theologians as discussed in my appraisal of Mbiti's continuity thesis above, Bediako (1999:235) opines a shift in the task of African theology from a religious concern (the Christianisation of African tradition) to an intellectual one, namely; that "African Christianity must now achieve an Africanisation of its Christian experience". Bediako (1996:23) makes an interesting point for decolonising theology when he offers a distinction between African Christianity and the "scholarly literature on it". However, as Maluleke (2000:17) argues, what is needed beyond this is "a two-way critical relationship between literature on African Christianity and actual African Christianity". This notwithstanding, the contributions of African theologians have significant academic, gender, pastoral, missiological, ecumenical and decolonial implications albeit limited for reasons discussed below. Arguably, these African theologians initiated incipient attempts at decolonisation and gave birth to a species of post-colonial theologies which must nevertheless be enriched by a decolonial perspective given their limitations to deeply engage with coloniality.

## **8. The limitations of African Theology as a species of Post-colonial Theology**

The theologians discussed above share what West (2016:352) describes as a common "post-colonial ideo-theological orientation". Following Punt's (2015:14), I distinguish between the hyphenated post-colonialism and non-hyphenated post-colonialism<sup>7</sup>. The former refers to the historical marker while the latter implies a hermeneutical construct. In the first instance, the writings by Mbiti, Mugambi, Oduyoye and Bediako served as antecedents to the continuing emergence of African post-colonial theology. Secondly, to the extent that these theologians foreground African theological agency, resist western theological hegemony, theologically hybridise by expanding Christian tradition to include ATR albeit in a non-reciprocal manner, and use a critical attitude towards mission Christianity and the legacies of colonialism, they constituted the vanguard of African postcolonial theology (Heaney, 2015:40). However, as Heaney (2015:19, 61) demonstrates in his analysis of the works of Mbiti and Mugambi, there is an unintended move away from the particularism of

<sup>7</sup> Postcolonial theories "highlight the complexity of imperialism" and "seek to understand the complex construction of the colonized and the colonizer" including strategies used by the colonized to resist domination (Dube, 2002).

experience in their later publications thus undermining an otherwise contextual nature of their theologising.

Apart from Oduoye, the male theologians, namely; Mbiti, Mugambi and Bediako are rather complicit to theological hegemony given tendencies to theorise at macro-level. Furthermore, in addition to the critiques of Mugambi's theology of reconstruction (Dedji, 2003:72-87; Sakupapa, 2017:209), I argue that Mugambi (1995:x, xv) overlooks the continuity of coloniality given his reading of a post-apartheid, post-Cold War and post-colonial Africa and vision of a New World Order. Seen together, these limitations weaken the postcolonial orientation of their theologies compared to, for instance, some strands of African biblical hermeneutics in which the theoretical value of postcolonialism is underlined (Dube, 2002; Punt, 2015; West, 2016).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, given recent critiques of postcolonialism (Jobling, 2005; Mignolo, 2011: xxvi-xxvii)<sup>9</sup> and the African intellectual critique of the myth of postcoloniality (Ndlovu Gatsheni, 2013:72), I argue that the decoloniality perspective may well help address the limitations of the above African theologies.

## 9. Decoloniality as new paradigm for African theology?

Distinct from postcolonial studies, not only in terms of arising from a historical context and genealogy of thought, the decoloniality perspective traces the roots of coloniality to the 16th century and frames coloniality as constitutive of modernity. It is the “darker side of modernity” (Mignolo, 2011:2). Drawing on Quijano (2007), Mignolo (2012:24) describes coloniality as “a matrix for management and control of the economy, authority, knowledge, gender, sexuality and subjectivity.”<sup>10</sup> The goal of decoloniality is therefore to de-link from the colonial matrix. In Maldonado-Torres' (2007:261) words, the decolonial turn “introduces questions about the effects of colonization in modern subjectivities and modern forms of life as well as contributions of racialized and colonized subjectivities to the production of knowledge and critical thinking”. In the African context, what Quijano theorises as the “colonial power matrix” is significant for unravelling the continuity of colonial mentalities, psychologies and worldviews beyond the different waves of political decolonisation. This notwithstanding, decoloniality is not a new phenomenon in Africa not least because of the many thinkers such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and

<sup>8</sup> See for example the contributions in Dube, M, Mbuvi, A.M & Mbuwayesango, D.R (eds). 2012. Post-colonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations. Society of Biblical Literature.

<sup>9</sup> Jobling (2005:191) contends that postcolonialism has the danger of – amongst others – “losing some of its closeness to local struggles but also becoming another intellectual fad within the Western globalising machine”. Others critique the principal postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha for being Eurocentric.

<sup>10</sup> On “coloniality of power” (see Quijano, 2007), “coloniality of being” (see Maldonado-Torres, 2007), “coloniality of knowledge” (see Lander, 2000; Mignolo), and “coloniality of gender” (see Lugones).

Steve Biko who have articulated various aspects of decoloniality (Mbembe, 2015). In Fanon's (2017) work, we encounter an explanation of the psychological effects of colonialism. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1994:16) articulating of the colonisation of the mind illustrates how the coloniser used language to impose colonial mind-sets on the psyche of African people. That the colonisation of the mind is the worst form of colonisation is evident in Steve Biko's (2017:101) observation that "the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the colonised".

In the South African context, decoloniality has gained significance against the backdrop of the various fallist movements and continuing debates around the transformation and Africanisation of higher education (Naidoo, 2016). This has brought into sharp focus questions around the very nature of the African university, knowledge production and most pointedly about questions around epistemology. These concerns are no less significant for theology. As part of the academy, theology is implicated in the facilitation and reproduction of epistemological coloniality (Antonio, 2006:19; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015:489). This illustrates the extent of epistemological colonisation. It is widely recognised that the theologies, curriculum, pedagogical structures and language in mainstream theological education in Africa remains largely western-centred not least within the South African context (Mugambi, 2003:206; Naidoo, 2016:6; Uzukwu, 2017; Venter, 2016:4). This is notwithstanding contextual theological impulses of the 1970s evident in the articulations of the theologians discussed in the first sections of this article. While there is no shortage of literature on the need for contextually relevant theologies and theological education in Africa (Maluleke, 2006; Mugambi, 2013:117), there are contemporary concerns regarding the consequence of theological education for the mission of the church (Amanze, 2012; Chitando, 2010) and of the "commodification of theological education" (Hadebe, 2017). Behind these concerns is an acknowledgement of the strategic importance of formal (academic) theological education for leadership development, mission and ministerial and theological formation especially among the so-called mainline churches.

Commenting on an anecdote told by Mbiti (1976b:6-8) about a theological student who had just returned home from studies abroad, Maluleke (2006:66) speaks of the "sheer impotence" of the theology graduate "in the face of typical African problems". Although not named as such, this story illumines an epistemological concern. It illustrates the alienation of theology graduates from the struggles and imaginations of people they serve. From the discussion in the previous section, there is an evident decolonising impetus in the theologies of Bediako, Mbiti, Mugambi and Oduyoye. I suggest that the decoloniality perspective may well help address the limitations of their theologies as outlined in the previous section. Although such a call is not necessarily new, most of the recent calls for the decolonisation of theol-

ogy – mainly raised from within the South African context – (Hadebe, 2017:7; Naidoo, 2016; Ramantswana, 2016:189) beg further reflection and articulation of African theology as decolonial episteme. African theology, in its variants, is far from being centred in the curriculum and broader conversation on Christian doctrine in academic discourse in Africa. Does this suggest that African theology is merely an “addition” to the supposed western universal tradition?

Arguably, although liberation theologies and postmodernity [largely a phenomenon of western culture] have challenged the totalising claims of western theology (Mignolo, 2011:92), western theology insidiously lays claim to universality. To address the epistemological violence implied here, Venter’s (2016:4) call to take very seriously “questions about whose knowledge and knowledge for whom” is crucial. I argue that what is needed is a decolonial imagination as a methodological necessity in African theology. This implies epistemological questions around how theology constructs knowledge and which sources are deemed authentic and by whom. While it may be plausible to consider South African black theology of liberation as “quintessentially de-colonialist” (Vellem, 2017:3), decoloniality offers both promises and challenges to African theologians not least those working on various aspects of Christian doctrine. As I will argue in the next section, this begs further reflections on the potential challenges that decoloniality poses particularly for African systematic theology.

## **10. African theology as Decolonial Episteme: Challenges and Prospects**

Theology is arguably a strongly traditioned discipline. Systematic theology, as a heritage of western theology offers reflection on Christian doctrine and engages the creedal basis of key theological ideas such as the Christology, God, revelation and ecclesiology among others. An understanding of the imperial context within which Christian doctrine was consolidated begs the question whether or not Christian notions of revelation and the creedal formulations are not already mired, epistemologically, in colonial relations of power (Drexler-Dreis, 2018:3). The translation of creedal Christianity via western theology has resulted in the articulation of theology that invokes the theological traditions and intellectual genealogies of Europe. Therefore, to what extent do African systematic theologies retain and perpetuate epistemological coloniality? In what follows, I highlight aspects that are crucial for decolonial African theology.

First, African theology as decolonial episteme entails that western-centric theology must be disrupted through epistemological delinking. As conceptualised by Mignolo (2007:497), de-linking from the logic of coloniality, implies an epistemic shift from uni-versality to pluri-versality. Mignolo (2007:453) uses the notion of pluriversality as an attempt to “denounce the pretended universality” of the West. It suggests the foregrounding of other epistemologies. In theology, this implies the rejection of the

false notion of the universal applicability of western theology. As decolonial episteme, African theology must unapologetically disrupt Eurocentric theologies. As argued in the previous section, western theology insidiously lays claim to theological superiority. Despite the dictum that all theology, including western theology, is by nature contextual, the discourse on the decolonisation of theological education demonstrates that a Eurocentric canon is centred while African theology is almost assigned the periphery. As Nigerian Roman Catholic theologian Elochukwu Uzukwu (2017:109) observes, “colonial imprints, control and language games, must be consciously and methodologically challenged in African theology in order to give priority to the local in the reframing of the Christian praxis story”. This speaks to the need for decentering the West (Mbembe, 2016) in African systematic theology. Decolonial thinking, Mignolo (2012:42) argues, “means engaging in knowledge making and transformation at the edge, in and, of the disciplines”. In the context of theological education, this entails not only a deliberate centering of African voices in the curriculum but also awareness of underlying epistemological foundations of the curricula and pedagogical structures of theological education. Arguably, even if only Africans taught theology in theological institutions and universities in Africa, it would make little difference if such Africans remain trapped in Eurocentric and thus epistemologically colonised. Such is tantamount to the missionary indigenisation policies.

Secondly, decolonial theology is not merely a critique of a Eurocentric narrative in theology but also entails a decolonial critique of essentialist articulations of theological decolonisation. The fate of numerous African christologies that depicted a Christ who could not even be recognised within the contexts which such christologies claimed to foreground. Thus, as Bediako (1993:23) argued, African theology should not merely be “abstract concepts, but African categories of experience” (Bujo, 1992:70). If not, African theology stands in need of decolonisation. These concerns are taken up by a younger generation of African scholars who articulate Christologies with due regard to contemporary African experience (Ezigo, 2010). This requires foregrounding local content.

Thirdly, in the contemporary situation, decolonial African theology will need to engage with the insights of contemporary African Christianity in its many variants, most notably the Pentecostal charismatic movement and various African independent churches. With regard to Pentecostalism, African theology as decolonial episteme will be critical of monolithic understandings of Christian tradition. As Uzukwu (2017:109) suggests, this will entail “the critical reevaluation of tradition and Christian thought”. Nevertheless, this also calls for critical reflection on whether or not certain forms of Pentecostal practice represent the “continuation of colonial influences on Africa” (Niemandt, 2017:213). With regard to AICs, African decolonial theology may well contribute towards rethinking the portrayal of

indigeneity in these movements as articulated in Eurocentric constructs of African religious movements. African theology as decolonial episteme, issues into an impulse for knowledge construction that is rooted in African experience and relevant to the African situation. It must lead to a rediscovery of “‘grassroots’ theology” as “an abiding element of all theology” (Bediako, 1993:23). In doing so, however, the entangled nature of forms of knowledge in contemporary Africa must be borne in mind in order to avoid the illusion of “pure” African forms of knowledge.

Fourthly, African theology as decolonial theology needs to hold in creative tension the relationship between contextualisation and a theological notion of catholicity. Here, the ecumenical orientation in the works of African theologians discussed in the earlier sections of this article is instructive. As Quijano (2007:177) argues, decoloniality “is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings”.

## 11. Some concluding thoughts

This article explored the decolonising content in the writings of four African theologians and argued that while the writings of these theologians indeed have decolonising impetus, they do not go far enough to unravel the continuity of coloniality. Therefore, this contribution argued for a view of decoloniality as methodological necessity in contemporary African context. As intellectual reflections on African Christianity, such decolonial African theology will unravel western value-setting (in the epistemic sense) in theology and foreground African theological agency. This entails delinking from hegemonic western theology and a critical attitude towards monolithic understandings of Christian tradition. This necessarily calls for the need to cultivate a decolonial imagination in which theological reflection engages “grassroots” experiences of African Christians. With respect to theological education, it was decolonial African theology calls for intentional awareness of underlying epistemological structures of theological content, curricula and pedagogical structures. The article concluded with highlighting some possible challenges of decoloniality in African theology as well as indicating a decolonial ecumenical trajectory without re-inscribing coloniality. Contemporary and future African theology will have to be decolonial, intercultural, contextual and ecumenical.

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