

Engelbert Mveng and Jean Marc Éla: Bridging the gulf between liberation and inculturation

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Abstract

The history of African theology reveals the emergence of two dominant theological trends: inculturation and liberation. The former aims to incarnate the Christian faith into African culture, while the latter seeks to reclaim the intrinsic worth of the African violated by colonialism and to promote the social transformation of Africa. However, the 1990s witnessed a preponderance of inculturation theology that engaged the attention of many African theologians. During this period, Engelbert Mveng (1930–1995) and Jean Marc Éla (1936–2008) sought to inculturate the Christian faith into the African soil in a manner that speaks to the peculiarities of Africa without creating a dichotomy between inculturation and liberation methods. Their respective contextual theologies contributed towards fostering a creative balance between inculturation and liberation trends. This article examines the seminal contributions of Mveng and Éla towards sieving out a decolonised African theology. It uses analytical and comparative approaches to present the theologies of Mveng and Éla. It will argue that although inculturation and liberation emphases are distinct, they are complementary in an effort to graft a contextual theology that is truly Christian and African.

Keywords

Africa; inculturation; liberation; Christian faith; justice; poverty

Introduction

The late Nigerian literary icon, Chinua Achebe, once took a swipe at Joseph Conrad in a 1975 public lecture at the University of Massachusetts. The ire of Achebe was incensed by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) which depicted Africa as primitiveness personified. In that novel, the inhabitants

of Africa were similarly portrayed as occupying a land that had long been forgotten by time. As part of Africa's postcolonial critical movement, Achebe's lecture entitled "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness", bore the imprints of the concerns of his generation. One of the principal interests of the African intelligentsia in the pre- and post-independent periods was the insistence on African cultural affirmation as a way to cope with the effects of colonialism (Achebe 1977:782–794; Attridge 2018). The decades of the 1960s and 1970s were awash with cultural and literary initiatives and projects. Their main goal was to refute a haze of distortions about Africa, its people, its culture, tradition, and its religion. Within that same climate, a Marxist like Frantz Fanon maintained the view that mere cultural affirmation in itself was not sufficient. However, as far as that generation was concerned, Africa's much envisaged future could only become a reality through political liberation and socio-economic restructuring (Gifford 2008b:203).

What came to be known as "African Theology" was birthed in the clime of that cultural affirmation as an alternative way of doing Christian theology in cognizance of the peculiarity of the African context. Two Cameroonian theologians, Engelbert Mveng and Jean-Marc Éla, are recognised as "modern" pioneers of African theology. Both theologians are the faces of the two complementary strands of African theology which John Pobee categorises as cultural and political routes (Pobee 1993:142). The historical trajectory of African theology shows it as twofold-sided, with the stamp of being brewed in the African pot for *homo Africanus* (see Orobator 2011:2–16). *Theologia Africana* is expressive of the struggles of Africans against cultural annihilation and reflective of African resistance against economic oppression and political domination. Simply put, *homo Africanus* is both the meeting point and the reference point for African theology.

While the continent, on the one hand, is the *locus theologicus*, *homo Africanus* on the other hand, is the yardstick *par excellence* to gauge the contextualisation and relevance of African theology. This is particularly so because *homo Africanus* is its primary recipient whether approached through the inculturation brand or the liberation strand. This article is poised to highlight in *pari passu* the contributions of Mveng and Éla towards the contextualisation of theology in Africa. It will demonstrate

some common grounds or points of convergence between both theologians in order to arrive at a conclusion.

The 1980s/1990s African context

It was the Taiwanese theologian, Shoki Coe (1914–1988) who coined the term “contextualisation” as a theological concept. Coe describes contextualisation as a method of assessing the significance of an incarnational ministry in an ever-changing society. For him, it is foolhardy to disregard a changing social context. In his 1968 seminal book entitled, *Joint Action for Mission in Formosa: A Call for Advance into a New Era*, Coe formalised “contextualisation” as an emerging theological method (Wheeler 2002:78–79). African theology, whether as inculturation or liberation, is a highly contextualised theology. It emerges from the socio-cultural, economic, religious, political, and historical conditions of Africa (Ogbonnaya 2015:26). For a better appreciation of the thoughts of Mveng and Éla, it is imperative to recall the 1980s and 1990s of African milieu in which they lived and worked. Those decades influenced them and their works. Although both theologians made their debuts in the early 1970s, it was much later in the successive decades that they attained their height and flowering. A declining African social condition and its offshoot of miseries would occupy their attention and featured prominently in their writings. Jean-Marc Éla wrote two important books during this period: *African Cry* (1986) and *My Faith as an African* (1988). Engelbert Mveng also wrote some important works such as *L’Afrique dans l’Eglise: Paroles d’un croyant* (1985), *Spirituality and Liberation in Africa* (1987), and posthumously, in collaboration with B. L. Lipawing, *Liberation and African Cultures: Dialogue on Black African Anthropology* (1996).

Africa became a political and economic basket case after the euphoria of the independence era had evaporated. The continent was in the strong grips of poverty, hunger, drought, diseases, unemployment, and political instability. According to Gerardo Serra, by 1983, many African countries were effectively in economic and political crisis. The hopes of economic and social progress that animated the struggle for independence appeared to belong to a very distant past. The situation was further aggravated by a wave of military coups d’état, sluggish growth and skyrocketing debts

across much of sub-Saharan Africa (Serra 2018:150). Against this backdrop of hopelessness, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria once berated African political leaders for betraying the hopes and aspirations of Africans. They held African leaders accountable for the impoverishment of their people. In the strongest possible words, the bishops described African political leaders as a gang of oppressors, exploiters, rogues, and thieves (cited in Ilesanmi 1995a:71).

In the south of the Sahara, countries became theatres of competing economic theories and experimenting grounds for development policies. Various attempts to improve African social condition and economic development were made from 1980 to 1991. One of such attempts was the UN Programme of Action for Africa's Economic Recovery and Development, (UN-PAAERD), adopted in 1986. It was based on Africa's Priority Programme for Economic Recovery 1986–1990 (APPER), adopted by Heads of State and Government of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The UN-PAAERD, in a number of ways noted that, at least 40 percent of African population was worse in 1991 than in 1980, coupled with a general collapse in education, public health, agriculture, and economic infrastructure. Life expectancy was at an all-time low as food production declined to about 1 percent when measured against population growth of nearly 3 percent per year. The situation was compounded by severe climatic conditions and declining agricultural prices, which previously had been the mainstay of the economy of sub-Saharan Africa. The cumulative effect was a mountain of foreign debts because foreign earning could not keep pace with exports. For instance, Africa's export earnings in 1986 and 1987 were about 20 percent lower than those of 1985, while foreign debt servicing obligations stood at \$220 billion in 1988. Debt servicing consumed more than half of the foreign earnings of most African countries. Of the estimated \$45.6 billion credit flow for the five-year period of recovery, a whopping \$14.6 billion was earmarked for external debt servicing that would extend backward from 1985 (United Nations 1986:5; "The Abuja Statement" 1987:137; Gifford 1994a:514–515).

Many African countries responded to the dire socio-economic conditions by queuing up for the economic antidote, prepared for them by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. It was called "Structural Adjustment Programmes" (SAPs) that became a *sine qua non* to secure

foreign credit and financial assistance. SAPs did not succeed to mitigate the economic crisis. Instead, it undermined the functioning and stability of post-independent African states, characterised by a conspicuous absence of government in the lives of ordinary Africans. The vacuum was filled by a multiplication of non-governmental organisations and a plethora of international institutions that purportedly came to rescue Africa from economic and developmental annihilation (Serra 2018:153). A takeaway from the quagmire is that none of the various policies and programmes contributed to any permanent solution for Africa. Their failure is explained by the fact that their formulators did not consider the political aspect of the monster. According to Zeynep Bostan, Africa during the Cold War period was more of an arena of ideological conflicts. Its political terrain did not provide a conducive economic environment for development since no attempt at economic development can succeed without a strong political backbone (Bostan 2011:2). For someone like Mveng, the worst poverty in Africa was the lack of any political doctrine or ideology as could be seen through political, economic, military, financial, and ideological somersaults. The absence of any feasible ideology made space for the logic of self-aggrandisement to hold sway (Mveng 1992b).

Against this background, Mveng and Éla abhorred the moralising and philanthropic attitude towards Africa's abject poverty. Mveng described such attitudes as "pseudo-philanthropic" because they wore the mask of compassion while acting as a corruptive form of impoverishment. It was a system through which people were plundered and countries rendered bankrupt with the active connivance of their political leaders. Philanthropy and its "compassionate" apparatus were nothing but a cover for the machine of domination and mechanism of impoverishment (Mveng 1992b). The same was true of foreign debt which the two Cameroonian theologians saw as another form of enslavement that condemned Africans to perpetual poverty. They would have been horrified today were they alive to see Africa's indebtedness to the Dragon Empire. About 21 percent of Africa's external debt is owed to China. It has been estimated that 38 African countries in 2021 are to make a repayment of \$25 billion to China alone. Such haemorrhaging of Africa depletes the continent's resources and does not leave much for any meaningful investment in education, health and other sectors that can improve the quality of life of the people.

This is particularly acute because Africa's debt is a heavy burden and far more than the continent can realistically afford (Acker et al 2021; United World International 2020). In a very poetic manner that was one of the characteristics of his works, Mveng once mournfully depicted the boat of death that left Africa drifting amidst a sea of debts and hopelessness (Mveng 1992b):

But the heads of state and political parties, despite speeches and promises, have been precipitated with their peoples on the crazy boat of new easements. On the shore, hands in pockets, full of the spoils of our peoples, the masters of the world, raptors in debt, watch this drifting boat and we hear their laughter mingling with the roar of the raging waves.

Major thrusts like poverty, misery, dehumanisation, slavery, and cultural issues that were frequent themes in the works of Mveng and Éla are traceable to their francophone background. With few exceptions, African liberation theology seemed to have been the domain of francophone Africa. As noted by Emmanuel Martey: “While the inculturationists are mainly from Anglophone Africa, the liberationists are mainly from francophone Africa” (Martey 2009:69). A preponderance of the liberationists used to be Cameroonians whose preoccupation was to find a synthesis between inculturation and liberation theology. Alongside Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, Mveng, and Éla were wearied about the neo-colonial socioeconomic policies and overbearing interference of France in the affairs of its former colonies in Africa.

Through its colonial policy of assimilation, France effectively denied the right of Africans to be different and sought to abolish their unique African identity. That policy has somewhat continued in another form with the introduction of a common currency – the CFA on 26 December 1945. The change in name from “Colonies Française Africaine” to “Communauté Financière Africaine” has not led to any significant change in the core policy for establishing it. It requires African countries that use the CFA to deposit 50 percent of their foreign assets in the French Treasury. The fourteen countries that make up the CFA bloc have a total population of about 160.9 million people which is about 14 percent of Africa's population. They altogether account for about 12 percent of the continent's GDP

(African News 2019a & b). Experts on African economy believe that French credit policy towards Africa is a double-edged sword that perpetuates the scheme of economic affairs in favour of France. It has not improved the economic lot of the francophone countries. On the contrary, through the Paris Club, France continues to maintain its stronghold over its former colonies (United World International 2020). This explains why Mveng and Éla exerted themselves in opening the eyes of Africans to their enslavement and impoverishment. In comparison to Europe and North America, poverty may mean social exclusion and deprivation. But in the African context, poverty brings about misery and despair, and turns the continent into a place where “precariousness and scarcity constitute the web of daily life” (Éla 1999b:108). It affects African institutions and structures at their very essence (Éla 1998a; Mveng 1992b).

Mveng: Nexus between liberation and inculturation

In a tribute to Mveng, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his assassination, Lucie Sarr in *La Croix Africa*, described him as “one of the first African voices of inculturation and liberation theology” (Sarr 2021). Mveng’s concept of inculturation and liberation is an integration of art, poetry, history, anthropology, and theology. Those five components gave a special flavour to his works, which helped establish him as a protester and a prophet. Liberation as conceived by Mveng ought to lead to Beatitudes which is a liberation from death, hatred, and servitude. For this reason, according to him, “the Christian must be a protester and a prophet.” As an artist and defender of African traditional art, he saw it as a source of theology because “traditional African art is the creative work of Black African genius. Through this work, the African man expresses his vision of the world, his vision of man and his conception of God” (cited in Sarr 2021). Art is also a germ of African cultural heritage and a meeting place to welcome the Gospel because “to evangelise our culture is to allow God to speak to us in our language, it is also to allow us to respond to him” (cited in Sarr 2021).

The immersion of Mveng into traditional African art led him to move within the circle of African elites such as Léopold Senghor and other supporters of the Negritude Movement. Mveng was among the participants

at the first Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar, Senegal in 1966. He also took part in the second Festival of Negro Arts (FESTAC) held in 1977 in Lagos, Nigeria. Mveng was not an ordinary participant at the Lagos festival. He was actually its secretary general that saw its organisation and execution. His art works adequately encapsulate his “theology of life” (O’Donovan 2019). It was a protest against everything that threatens life. For fear that Black Africans might be eclipsed in the global world of arts, Mveng exerted himself to ensure that African traditional art took its place at the table of world arts. As he opined: “I wanted African art to take its place in modern life, in architecture, in clothing, in the Church, in prayer, because its absence would mean our absence, the definitive annihilation of Africa from the depths. If I did not succeed, at least some works will survive” (cited in Bibeme 2014).

The place of Africa in world affairs was a constant preoccupation for Mveng. He was considered an *Africo-phile* on account of his love and passion for the continent (cited in Bibeme 2014). His collection of poems entitled *Balafon* from 1956 to 1971, illustrates the contributions of Africans to universal civilisation, especially fraternity, and humanism. Africa is the interlocutor in *Balafon* and addresses itself to people of the other continents: “I am Africa; And I greet you; Me, Africa at noon in the fullness of my sun!” The recipients are designated by their skin colours: “Letter to Kong-fu-Tseu” is directed to Asia, “Letter to Roland Roger” is addressed to Europe and “Letter to Moteczuma” is designated to Native Americans” (Mveng 1972a). The letters are accompanied by a “Collective Letter” to humanity as a plea from Africa to people of all races and religions to live in peace and universal fraternity. The *Balafon* is re-echoed in the poem, “Pentecost” which is a symbol of unity and the victory of life over division and death: “The tam-tam says: Pentecost! Pentecost, Pentecost, answers the *balafon*. The drum, Pentecost! The arc of vibration on the lip of silence, Pentecost!” (Mveng 1972a; Poucouta 1998:42). It also contains Mveng’s cultural vision of a Christian faith that was respectful of African traditional culture. At the heart of this cultural perception are universal peace, love, and fraternity, which gives Mveng away as idealistic in envisioning a new world order (Poucouta 1998:42; Bibeme 2014).

Given the distinction between liberation and inculturation theology, Mveng like some of the other pioneers of African theology did not draw a

clear line of demarcation between the two strands. It was somewhat hazy in the early years as the proponents of African theology struggled to find a space for their new brand of theology among a host of different Christian theologies. For instance, someone like Patrick N. Wachege credits Charles Nyamiti with the coinage of “African Inculturation Liberation Theology”. It was an effort to fashion out an African theology that would effectively accommodate and interrelate both strands as a possible third option (Wachege 1992a:43–56 & 2008b:156). However, Nyamiti himself prefers to be associated with African theology of inculturation instead of African liberation theology. In his estimation: “African theology of inculturation fits better with my academic formation in theology and cultural anthropology ... the inculturation approach appears to me to be in a better position to avoid the danger of reductionism and impoverishing the Gospel message by approaching it from the perspective of only one particular category, as is the case with the liberation trend” (Nyamiti 1991:35; Wachege 2008b:156).

It is, therefore, not surprising that while some African theologians preferred to view liberation as separate from inculturation, others considered it as complementary to inculturation. Mveng did not equally assume a clear position in this regard. He rather appeared to have been the citizen of both worlds (Hmsarthistorian 2012). Instructively, someone like John Mbiti was once dismissive of Black theology, which in his affirmation, was “full of sorrow, bitterness, anger and hatred” (Ilesanmi 1995a:62). By implication, Mbiti seemed to insinuate that Black Theology, at the time, was not of immediate relevance to Africa. Perhaps this explains why the Liberian theologian, Canon Burgess Carr insisted that independent African countries needed liberation theology as much as, if not more than the Blacks in Southern African territories that were then under colonial rule (Ilesanmi 1995a:71). Canon Carr, like Mveng, wanted a two-faced African theology where inculturation would not downplay the importance of liberation as he posed the question: “Why should someone save his soul at the expense of emasculating my humanity?” (Cited in Sundkler & Steed 2004:1028). The entire project of African theology itself, was at one point, adjudged to be a heathen adventure to corrupt Christianity as evident in this remark by Solomon Muthuyka: “The secret behind the Africanisation of Christianity is the work of Satan himself, the spirit of Anti-Christ. He

(i.e.), the advocate of African theology aims at the heathenisation of the African church” (cited in Pobee 1993:137).

The fluidity in the thoughts of Mveng about liberation and inculturation is to be inserted within the milieu of the early stages of African theology. This is noticeable in his comprehension of anthropological and material poverty. According to René Heyer, as far as Mveng is concerned, there exists a correlation between material poverty and cultural poverty. The key to unlocking his mind on socioeconomic and socio-cultural/political issues is life which was at the very centre of his intuition (Heyer 2011:134–135). Africa was also the centrepiece of his attention which he conceived as the land of hope. In light of the continent’s past sufferings through slavery, colonialism, cultural denigration, propagandistic evangelisation, and dysfunctional postcolonial states, Mveng combined the struggle for cultural emancipation with economic and political liberation. Employing both tools, Mveng re-read the many scars of Africa. He fought against the slightest sign of “anthropological poverty” that may be visited upon Africans either from within or from without. He wanted a Christianity with an African face (Muka 2020). In addition, he remained unapologetic that “The vocation of Black Africa today is to awaken its creative genius, and to bring to the new century, the contribution of Negritude to universal civilisation” (Cited in Poucota 1998:34). Mveng’s disapproval of *universal theology* is to be seen through this prism. He saw it as a western desire for control and manipulation (Akinade 2012:110). His concern is that it seeks to deprive African Christians of the right to be different, and to stop them from deconstructing and reconstructing theological themes through the African reality and experience (Hegba 2011:41).

Êla: Socio-economic liberation as inculturation

The emergence of liberation theology, as explicated by Birchell Taylor and Burchell Taylor, is “the great new fact” of the history of the churches in the world, especially those in the third world. Liberation theology, by its nature, is not monolithic. It groups within its embrace a diversity of forms, emphases, perspectives, and critical issues (Taylor & Taylor 1991:19). The divergences aside, a cornerstone of liberation theology is its preoccupation with the general and specific factors that give rise to dehumanisation

and marginalisation. The dismantling of the causes of poverty, unjust, and oppressive economic and political systems come within the context and scope of liberation theology. Also, its interest in historical praxis means that its proponents find themselves immersed in the world of the oppressed that makes them appear partisan. Herein lies the misconception about liberation theology since its focus on socio-economic and cultural situations earns it the reprimand as being overtly political.

However, the question posed about the meaning of God for people who are systematically oppressed and dehumanised cannot easily be swept under the carpet. Whether by chance or design, African theologians must perforce explain how the victims of injustice, oppression, and misery can reconcile their experience of dehumanisation with their dignity as children of a loving God (Taylor & Taylor 1991:22, 27). These were some of the issues that engaged the attention of Jean-Marc Éla. On account of his sensitivity to the world of the poor and his efforts on their behalf as well as his numerous writings in that regard, Bénézet Bujo calls Éla “the African theologian of liberation *par excellence*” (Bujo 2011:180, 189).

The Africa in which Éla lived, was and largely still remains, a continent of extremes: poverty, hunger, diseases, drought, underdevelopment, and lack of opportunities, especially for its young population. In light of those extremes, Leonard Shilgbu rightly observes: “no African scholar of note will deceive himself or herself into believing that all is well with Africa, or that Africa is making progress no matter the indices of measurement that may be employed” (cited in Ugwuanyi 2017:72). One of the charges against African theology is its seemingly aloofness from the African reality. Understandably, Tersur Aben dismisses it as more of an “illusion than a reality” (cited in Michael 2014:81) due to its existence in the cosy world of academics. It seems content to stay disinterested like a mirage in the realm of intellectual preoccupations. In relation to the missionary activities of African churches, Matthew Michael holds African theology in contempt for its preoccupation with “developing an ancestral Christology”, irrelevant to actual frontiers of African missions since “African people have continually come to salvation without the aid of such ancestral Christology” (Michael 2014:82). Such indictment may not apply to Éla who had this to say of himself and his people-oriented theology (cited in Bujo 2011:185):

I would point out that my theological reflection was born in the villages. My theology was born to be precise, under the palaver tree in the northern mountains of Cameroon. In the evenings, I gathered there with Africans of either sex to read the bible with African eyes. For fourteen years I shared their destiny and got involved in evangelizing. My theology was not born between walls made of concrete.

A superficial reading of his writings and the exertion of himself for the wretched of Africa may give the impression that African culture has no space in Éla's mental framework. Inasmuch as he did not disparage African indigenous cultures and worldviews, without doubt, he was pre-eminently concerned with finding critical and prophetic responses to the reality of Africans in their present situation. He disapproved of a delusional cultural romanticism in the chase of a presumed African pristine past where Africans were thought to have lived undisturbed in their indigenous cultures. In the estimation of Éla, the overemphasis on inculturation might be interpreted as an escape from contemporary Africa's harsh realities (cited in Ilesanmi 1995:63):

For all its vaunting of socio-cultural specificity, inculturation only promotes the values of the past, thus espousing a dead view of society, creating a mystique of vain expectation, and doing its best to check the revolt of the hungering masses by feeding them soporifics.

As a “rural man” who spent the early years of his priestly life in the mountainous area of Cameroon, Éla knew first-hand what it means to be materially poor and to live without social amenities like electricity and water, and the lack of schools for children. His distaste for negritude and all the empty talk about inculturation was born of the realisation that its proponents lived far away from the concrete African reality. As he regrettably put it: “While Africans were enclosed in this language of negritude and shut off from real life, others moved into the more important realms of economics and politics” (Éla 2019c:147–148). He would have no difficulty in agreeing with this assertion of an anonymous Somali Elder of Baidoa about the basic necessities of life that ordinary and poor Africans desperately need, which sadly have remained beyond reach (cited in Adedeji 2007:23):

First, is water. It is the first thing needed to live. Without it, a plant, an animal, or a baby dies. Second, is food. Without enough of it, life is miserable and short. Third, once water and food are won, is health – otherwise the human being becomes sick. Fourth, is education, once a human being has water, food, and health, he/she needs to learn to open new horizons and unlock new possibilities. And there is a fifth – peace and order. Without these, none of the four basic needs can be sustained.

In contradistinction to other African liberation theologians who may like to put their legs on both sides of cultural and political liberations, Éla's theological orientation moved strongly towards the socioeconomic and political wellbeing of Africans. He staunchly believed that economic poverty, deprivation, and social injustice were opposed to God's overall design for human life. This belief of his must be squared in the period of his days in Africa before he was forced to move into a self-exile after the assassination of Mveng in 1995. The World Bank Report on Africa for 1995 observed that "the plight of the African continent remains the most serious challenge for the emerging world order" (cited in Ilesanmi 2004b:78). In face of the inability of governments to reverse the misfortunes of African, the continent became rather an observer than an active participant on the global stage (Ilesanmi 2004b:79). Hence, amidst continental despair, Éla became a credible voice for Africa. He wanted to draw the attention of those who cared, to hear the groaning of poor Africans who persistently asked: "How long will this go on, my God?" (Éla 2019c:175). He agonised that people at the margin of African societies might be abandoned to famine and death, which he aptly called "an African scourge." It was an open affliction that perpetuated the "industry of misery" (Éla 2019c:87–90) almost everywhere on the continent. In consideration of Africa's multiple challenges, Éla sought to position socio-economic and political questions as legitimate worries for the Christian faith. It means that the Christian faith ought to be of social, economic, and political relevance to Africans. While Mveng wanted every Christian to become "a protester and a prophet," Éla for his part, desired to see every Christian in Africa "act as the voice of the voiceless" (cited in Bujo 2011:187).

A convergence of two minds

The 1986 African Report at the Second General Assembly of Third World Theologians in Mexico identified human promotion in Africa as the new name of evangelisation. It specified that human promotion entailed the “salvation of the whole man and woman in their world condition first, for the sake of God’s reign” (“African Report” 2019:43). Because salvation was understood in the context of human promotion and linked to evangelisation, the Report called it “the priority of priorities” (“African Report” 2019:43). It was in that sense that inculturation in connection to human promotion, was recognised as a form of evangelisation. Inculturation as evangelisation is “a matter of cultural redemption” while human promotion as evangelisation is “the struggle for fundamental human rights, and the political, economic, social and cultural liberation” (“African Report” 2019:443). In knitting the two together, the Report concluded (“African Report” 2019:44):

This context explains why all African theologians, whatever their roots, their language, their geographical situation, speak the same language – It is the language of liberation – liberation and evangelisation of Africans and their culture. That theology speaks first of all, the people’s language – about their needs, their worries, their hopes...

There is perceptively a point of convergence between Éla and Mveng. One of such convergences is the African reality that gave birth to African theology. As articulated in the 1986 African Report, the context of that birth was Africa’s quest for justice which emerged in two complementary directions: inculturation and liberation. In reference to justice, the Vatican’s document on liberation theology, published by the Congregation for Doctrine and Faith acknowledges the global yearning for justice. The document notes accurately: “theologies of liberation present diverse theologies – but all speak of the urgency of the practical realisation of justice and freedom” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1984). For Mveng, justice means liberation from “anthropological poverty” which goes beyond “deprivation of food or other material possessions” (Hmsarthistorian 2012). From the standpoint of Mveng, “anthropological poverty” is “a comprehensive form of poverty – the product of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, apartheid, and the universal derision that has

always accompanied the “civilised” world’s discourse upon an encounter with Africa – and still accompanies them today” (Hmsarthistorian 2012). He judged it a great crime and intolerable injustice when human beings are despoiled “not only of what they have, but of everything that constitutes their being and essence – their identity, history, ethnic roots, language, culture, faith, creativity, dignity, pride, ambitions, right to speak” (Hmsarthistorian 2012). This was the basis of Mveng’s insistence on cultural justice for Africans, which does not exclude social and economic justice and liberation from destitution. He wanted the whole world to be outraged at the historic injustice done to Africans by the western world that strenuously strove to annihilate Africans, their civilisations, and all they hold dear (Heyer 2011:137–138).

The magnum corpus of Éla teems with the theme of justice. It is the very pillar of his theology in all its ramifications. Justice for Éla is liberation from all that shackles the human spirit of Africans whether political oppression, socio-economic and cultural inhibitions that do not exclude religious authoritarianism or despotism. In the mindset of Éla, it is reprehensible to minimise the importance of people’s earthly wellbeing for the sake of the world to come. Wellbeing is inclusive of peace, happiness, justice, and freedom from material lack and coercion. It does mean that the hope for the hereafter must not be disconnected from the realities and situations of the here below (Bujo 2011:186). His agonising about the material situations of the people bears resemblance to that of Maulana Karenga: “Religion has an emancipator and social role in making a better life on earth and it has to be earth-focused and consciously concerned with the social and material as the spiritual” (Clark 2013:377). In Karenga’s intuition, God must have three characteristics of relevance to victims of oppression and injustice: (a) God must look like them; (b) He must have a history with them and (c) He must be to their advantage. In other words, God must be partisan, and the people must be His chosen people (Clark 2013:377). And like Karenga and the liberation theologians from Latin America, Éla made the prioritisation of the poor a major preoccupation in his theological research. He did not relent to insist that God in history takes the side of the poor, and scorns their exploitation and marginalisation (cited in Ogonnaya 2015:69):

Through the exodus event, God is revealed in the history of the promise. Deliverance from servitude in Egypt is an event

that illuminates the language of the promise ... For millions of Africans, the signs of a world in quest of freedom and justice are too evident not to attract the attention of churches that boast the Judaeo-Christian revelation or claim that the message of the exodus occupies a central place.

A few corollaries can further be established from the theologies of Mveng and Éla. In the first place, is the issue of human suffering and pain that impose themselves on the consciousness of Africans. For both theologians, in the face of despair and agony, it is reprehensible not to reconsider the social and active role of the Christian faith and theology through the prism of human existence, and specifically, in light of contemporary African realities. This leads to the question of “orthodoxy” and “orthopraxis” in relation to the Christian faith and African selfhood that is certainly beyond a mere cultural affirmation. It implies an *ecclesia reformanda* with a people-centred theology or a theology of the grassroots, rooted as it were, in the ghettos of human experience and condition. *Ecclesia reformanda* asks the Christian community to draw inspiration from the prophetic tradition and to reassess its theological ideas through the lens of the concrete situations of Africans, especially where they are hurting the most. It privileges “orthopraxis,” over “orthodoxy” not because it cares less about doctrinal orthodoxy. Its main emphasis is the translation of right belief into right conduct in defence of the weak, the poor and the oppressed of society (Taylor & Taylor 1991:23). There is also the place of the Cross, which must never be forgotten. Éla sees a symbiotic relationship between the Cross of Jesus Christ and the African experience: “the struggles of our people bring the memory of the Crucified One right into our own life and times ...” (Ilesanmi 1995a:65). As for Mveng, the Cross does not only symbolise “the clash with the powers of this world”, it ultimately symbolises the victory of life over death, and eschatological hope since “the Lord has not come to institutionalise and beatify misery, but to deliver us from it” (Akinade 2012:113).

Conclusion

African theology has come a long way. In the submission of John Pobee, it has travelled along six routes on its journey to contextualise the

Christian faith in Africa: culture, pluralism, politics, poverty, liturgy, and biblical worship (Pobee 1993:142; Ilesanmi 1995a:51). The six routes can be described as creeks, streams or rivers that have flowed and emptied themselves at the confluence of two big rivers: inculturation and liberation. Using the African context, especially that of the 1980s and 1990s as the confluence of the two big rivers, this article has endeavoured to show that inculturation and liberation are not mutually exclusive but complementary in their service to *homo Africanus*.

The complementarity of inculturation and liberation theology is typified by Engelbert Mveng and Jean-Marc Éla. To a large extent and in different degrees, the thoughts of Mveng and Éla have been presented in this article through the purview of double-belonging. Their theology is nurtured and aligned by two traditions: Africa and Christianity. Like their contemporaries, they sought to account for both traditions. While cultural affirmation remains important, African theology, through its liberation brand insists that African Christianity must never forget the concreteness of the life of poor Africans who live where the violence of misery and deprivation holds them subjugated.

Mveng may be qualified as an integralist because of his desire to fashion out a theology of holistic engagement that would identify and address issues through the lens of Africa's existential conditions and realities. Éla with his praxis-oriented approach, privileged a theology that was critical of the Christian faith and the church in relation to a myriad of African problems, particularly oppressive economic and political structures. Through the hermeneutics of a highly contextualised theology, albeit through two different roads, the point of arrival for Mveng and Éla, remained substantially the same – the centrality of the liberating power of the Gospel in the African context.

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