

The South African Christian story as conflict within us and quarrel amongst us

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Abstract

This article delves into the origins and extent of racial conflicts within and among us as South African Christians, questioning whether they arise from a flawed foundation. Employing an indigenous storytelling methodology, this article aims to uncover these quarrels and their impact on the church, academy, and society. Central to our exploration is the *endleleni* metaphor, meaning “on the road,” which will be defined to dismantle the divisive hierarchized foundation and foster a new interconnected foundation rooted in our shared humanity. Ultimately, the metaphor of *endleleni* lights the path towards a promising future.

Keywords

African; apartheid; Christianity; colonisation; endleleni; racial conflict; quarrel; South Africans' war

1. Introduction

This article emerged from the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa (SPTSA) conference held from 24th to 26th January 2023, hosted by the Faculty of Theology and Department of Practical Theology and Missiology at Stellenbosch University. The conference's theme was “The Crisis and Ethics of War: A Practical Theological Response,” which inspired the title of this article.

Allow me to commence by excavating into the metaphorical significance of “endleleni” as a pathway to the future. In African languages, metaphors and proverbs hold immense value as sources of wisdom, guiding us in the development of effective leadership and teamwork. These linguistic

expressions provide not only practical insights but also contribute philosophical and theoretical frameworks that form the basis of research. By tapping into the value systems of communities, these metaphors and proverbs inform program interventions designed to address the diverse needs of the people (Chilisa 2012).

“Amaqobokazana angalala endleleni yazini kunyembelekile,” meaning “young maidens”, are not named for their age but for the significance of their mission. When these young maidens sleep “endleleni” (on the road), something valuable is at stake, or someone’s life is in danger, which is why they are warned to “Balala be bambe umkhonto ngobukhali” (“they sleep holding the spear with the sharp edge”). In other words, they are aware of the risks and vulnerability associated with resting “endleleni” (on the road) (Penxa-Matholeni, 2020a). The “endleleni” metaphor will be used in this text as the way forward and will further elaborate on the next section and later in the article.

2. Methodology

This section introduces indigenous storytelling methodology as an innovative approach to data collection. According to Riessman (2008:4), “narrative is ubiquitous, finding expression in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting, stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, and everyday conversations.” To further expand on this concept, I propose the inclusion of songs, traditional African dance, iintsomi (folktales), clapping of hands, children’s names, place names, proverbs, and metaphors as additional forms of indigenous storytelling (Penxa-Matholeni 2022a:146–150). The “endleleni” metaphor is employed in textual form, not merely to provide philosophical and theoretical frameworks, but to offer a comprehensive exploration of intricate cultural nuances while demonstrating various approaches to crafting an indigenous African oral tradition.

The rationale behind adopting indigenous storytelling as a methodology is twofold. Firstly, stories inherently reflect the values of a society and serve as educational tools “eziko” (by the fire), offering profound insights into various facets of society, family dynamics, and social relations. Secondly, it acknowledges and embraces diverse cultures and contexts, firmly

rooted in the rich tradition of oral storytelling within African indigenous communities.

Furthermore, the proposed use of indigenous storytelling in this context signifies a deep respect for various ways of acquiring knowledge and local experiences that might have been previously overlooked, concealed, or marginalized. This approach is closely aligned with the decolonial agenda, emphasizing the imperative importance of valuing, and integrating, indigenous knowledge and perspectives. As Elabor-Idemudia (2002:103) aptly observes, oral forms of knowledge, including ritualistic chants, riddles, songs, folktales, proverbs, metaphors, and parables, serve the dual purpose of expressing a unique cultural identity while also providing a platform for a myriad of cultural, social, political, aesthetic, and linguistic systems. These forms of knowledge have long remained silenced under the weight of centuries of colonialism and cultural imperialism.

2.1 Self-location

According to Ramantswana (2016), the concept of social location goes beyond geographical place, encompassing the author's position in the racialized world we inhabit, whether in Africa or South Africa. As a black (South) African woman and a minister of the Word of God, I have personally experienced being silenced due to my gender and the colour of my skin. As an emerging scholar, I have observed researchers from around the globe trivializing my culture and the ontologies of black Africans. Furthermore, I found myself serving as a gatekeeper for the missionaries who brought the word of God to "them", the so-called "ungodly". Recognizing the dangers of perpetuating such perspectives, I have actively embraced un-Westernized thinking and Africanized my lenses whenever I tell an African story. As a result, my interpretation of this text carries the footprints of who I am and where I come from, drawing on my unique background and experiences.

3. Bleeding foundations

3.1 Colonial Christian Foundation

According to Ramantswana (2016), colonialism was perpetuated through the violent conquest of black peoples, leading to the establishment of a racial hierarchy and the hierarchization of social, spiritual, and

knowledge production. Dascal (2009) characterizes this phenomenon as the “colonizer’s epistemic principle of ‘invidious comparison’“, in which colonizers differentiated between the “primitive” mentalities and barbaric spirituality of the colonized and the “superior” or “civilized” mentalities and spirituality of the colonizers.

Despite the eventual collapse of colonial and apartheid regimes in (South) Africa, Maldonado-Torres (2007:243) observes that colonialism endures, deeply ingrained in various aspects of our daily experiences. This enduring presence is evident in literature, academic performance standards, cultural norms, common beliefs, self-perceptions, aspirations, and the consciousness of those who were colonized.

Coloniality also extended to spiritual and religious hierarchies. European missionaries condemned African traditional religion (ATR), driving it underground and into the shadows (Mndende, 1998). Practices like the naming and initiation rituals of the amaXhosa were stigmatized and labelled as heathen. This disdain for ATR by European missionaries contributed to the “othering” and misinterpretation of amaXhosa customs, as elucidated by Goduka (1999).

Mndende (1998) asserts that missionaries regarded themselves as superior in terms of religion, race, and gender, perceiving aspects of amaXhosa spirituality that did not conform to European standards as offensive, abhorrent, primitive, savage, and barbaric. Manona (1991:36) provides two examples of how this condemnation manifested in the actions of missionaries towards the amaXhosa. First, “Rev. Laing, who served the community from 1831 to 1872, burnt “amabhuma” (boys’ initiation schools) at one time and spilled umqombothi (African traditional beer) being consumed by his followers. Second, in late 1939 in Grahamstown, a white clergy threatened boys who sought to attend the initiation school with excommunication. Despite this threat, the boys defied the order and completed the entire process of traditional initiation. However, upon their return, they were required to confess before being allowed to participate in regular Church activities again.”

These events set the stage for the foundations that shaped notions of religion, spirituality, and Christianity as superior. In South Africa, certain biblical scholars, including Punt (2009), Masenya (2004), Jonker (2006), Loubser

(1996), and Vosloo (2015), among others, have written about the scriptures that were used to justify apartheid as Christian or divinely ordained policies. In essence, these practices contributed to the construction of hierarchized foundations.

The colonial expansion and domination allowed White privilege to operate on a global scale, making race and the racial hierarchy that favoured Europeans or Whites strikingly evident. In South Africa, segregated communities further exacerbated these hierarchies, underpinned by the so-called “Christian policy of apartheid”.

3.2 Apartheid’s divisive legacy: Examining the Group Areas Act No. 41 of 1950

To provide context for the aforementioned act, I will briefly outline the picture of South Africa and how it hindered social transformation to serve the interests of a white minority. As Steyn (2005:122) explains, the historical and political configuration in South Africa made the advantage of whiteness visible and defined the social construction of racial identity, establishing boundaries for non-white racial groups. During apartheid, racial and ethnic boundaries were overtly set, lacking invisibility as a norm operating in the background.

Segregation was employed to legitimize social and economic inequalities across all aspects of life (Beinart & Dubow 1995). The Group Areas Act in the late 1950s rigidly divided South Africans into “white,” “coloured,” “Indian,” and “black African” areas, creating residential segregation to control the growth of the urban African population and regulate where African workers could reside if permitted in cities. African workers often lived in overcrowded migrant hostels, while shack settlements were restricted from cities and towns in “white” South Africa. The most hostile period of forced removals ended in 1966.

In contrast, the so-called “coloureds” were granted special status in the Western Cape. Boesak (2009) explains that the apartheid government implemented a divide-and-rule strategy, designating the Western Cape as a “coloured preferential area”. This allowed the so-called “coloured people” to own homes in specific areas, hold certain jobs, and move without the mandated *dompas* that black South Africans were required to carry. It’s

important to note that this “special status” didn’t equate to equality with white South Africans but was rather a deliberate tactic to sow conflict between black and coloured South Africans, reinforcing racial hierarchies.

Afrikaans dominated in the Western Cape and was intended to be the dominant language throughout the country. The class of 1976 fought vigorously to maintain their identity and resist linguistic control and exclusion. Language played a significant role in marking boundaries and excluding others, perpetuating divisions. The foundation on which this democracy was built is marked by these deeply entrenched and bleeding issues.

4. Effects of the bleeding foundations

4.1 Society

The Western Cape province remains profoundly marked by racial segregation, as is evidenced by the following observations:

- White South African citizens, for the most part, still primarily reside in predominantly white areas, keeping themselves separate from other racial groups.
- “Coloured people” predominantly inhabit the Cape Flats.
- The majority of South Africa’s black population continues to occupy townships, to which they were forcibly relocated in the 1960s, as noted by Penxa-Matholeni in 2021. This enduring spatial segregation has contributed to the widening gap between the privileged and the underprivileged.

Regrettably, the poverty and inequality experienced by black South Africans have not significantly improved since 1994. Instead, these disparities have become entrenched in our society’s core, forming part of its enduring foundations.

These lingering divisions have repercussions, often leading to conflicts and tensions both within and between different racial groups when they interact outside their own segregated spaces. It’s worth noting that the individuals most profoundly affected by these unresolved societal issues are the disadvantaged and marginalized South Africans. As Vellem (2013)

further emphasizes, our theoretical and intellectual endeavours may have significantly underestimated the importance of language, symbols, and personalities rooted in an African context.

4.2. Church

I will not delve into the roles played by churches in justifying the apartheid policy or their subsequent confessions and apologies, as numerous African theologians have meticulously documented that era. Instead, my focus is on the church's failure to envision economic emancipation for the marginalized and vulnerable. While some churches, including key figures such as Dr Alan Boesak and the late Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu, actively participated in the anti-apartheid movement, there appeared to be a lack of vision within the church to extend this fight beyond the attainment of democracy.

As Velle (2013) pointed out, the transitions and changes in our country's economic policy framework after 1994 remained deeply entrenched in the calculated rationality of neoliberal economics. Consequently, these economic policies continued to obstruct South Africa's critical challenge, which is to dismantle the deliberate and systematic foundations of racial dominance and economic exclusion. It seems that the church in South Africa has shifted towards a form of state theology, emphasizing the need for faith and clear partners for dialogue to advance the cause of justice. In the absence of such partnerships, those already in distress continue to suffer greatly.

The individuals caught in the crossfire are predominantly black women and those on the fringes of society. Rather than advocating for the economic emancipation of these marginalized individuals, the church has predominantly remained in the role of charity work. Since 1994, church outreach efforts, both local and international, have surged in the black townships of the Western Cape, South Africa, offering various forms of assistance, including food parcels, clothing, holiday clubs (even for those who were already Christianized), community development, and charitable activities. While these initiatives are not inherently wrong, the timing was crucial, as black people in the townships were still grappling with their place in Cape Town under the new democratic system.

One interpretation of these acts of charity is that they often unintentionally reinforced the negative messages propagated by apartheid-era Christianity and the Bible about black people: “You are at the mercy of white people.” This perpetuation of aid inadvertently created a crucial dilemma in a nation founded on hierarchies.

An incident that exemplifies what is happening on the margins is when a ten-year-old boy asked Sis Nobuntu, “Uhlala phi uThixo?” (“Where does God live?”) This question was rooted in the community where most churches go to evangelize and perform charity work, and where researchers conduct their studies. The holiday club organized by white American churches/missionaries or South African white mainline churches brought gifts, clothing, stationery, and Bibles for the children in the community. Regrettably, these acts of “good works” inadvertently shaped the ten-year-old’s perception of God, leading him to believe that God favoured white people – a result that reflects the enduring foundation of hierarchical spirituality.

This situation prompts the question Vellem (2013) posed: If the intentional and systematic creation of racial supremacy by the white race was aimed at generating inequalities, how can social justice and economic sustainability be achieved in post-1994 South Africa? Despite extensive debate on this question, I do not believe it has been practically answered.

4.3 Academy

Black female intellectuals working in colleges and universities grapple with a seemingly welcoming exterior that often harbours suspicion toward our intellectuality, echoing bell hooks’ (1991:152) astute observation. In the South African context, the deeply ingrained policy of apartheid left an indelible mark on society, permeating through various aspects, including higher education institutions. This system perpetuated pervasive inequalities, with white individuals, particularly men, enjoying an advantageous position in obtaining promotions and professorship status due to the legacy of colonization and apartheid ideology (Zulu, 2020).

Historically disadvantaged individuals, primarily including women, faced educational disparities. Black South African students received inferior schooling and limited funding compared to their white counterparts

(Vokwana 2005; Potgieter and Moleko 2005). Separate higher education institutions were established along racial lines, leaving most black women with limited educational opportunities, and often relegated to working as domestic laborers in the homes of other racial groups, particularly white households. Despite ongoing efforts to facilitate transformation, black women remain the most marginalized (Mirza 2006; Wilder et al 2013).

In response to these formidable challenges, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was established with the mission of dismantling the gatekeepers in academia and the church. As described by Müller Van Velden (2023), the Circle stands as a bastion of resistance against institutions that have historically silenced the voices of marginalized women. Mahabeer et al (2018) underscore how black academics are still perceived as “outsiders” within a superficially transformative environment. Their study explores themes such as converging journeys, disempowering practices within the academy, experiences of marginalization facilitated by the collusion of others, and the process of finding a voice through “voicelessness”. From my personal experiences, these themes persist, leaving black women to navigate their paths in relative isolation. These narratives must be shared.

Professor Amba Oduyoye (2001:10–11) astutely observed that African women embrace storytelling as a theological source, especially narratives that remain unwritten, particularly those of African women. She contends that stories hold a normative role in Africa’s oral tradition and are pivotal in biblical theology, providing women with a paradigm for their theological reflection. The approach, however, entails both the act of storytelling and subsequent reflection upon it.

It is also crucial to consider that when a black African woman conforms to societal expectations and accepts an inferior position, she is rewarded with benevolence, often ensuring her “poverty,” for which she is expected to express deep gratitude. On the contrary, when she becomes self-confident and demands equality, she may be met with disapproval, perceived as a victim developing unexpected power and resilience that might challenge established norms. In departing from the conventional frame designated for black women, she ventures into a territory not typically reserved for her (Penxa-Matholeni et al 2023).

Therefore, the concept of diversity often becomes problematic, serving as a mere facade for transformation without genuinely embracing the unique contributions and experiences of black women. These challenges manifest as obstacles at all levels of academia, raising doubts about their intelligence, competence, and legitimacy as “outsiders-within” the academic realm (Mirza 2006; Wilder et al 2013). Nonetheless, this “outsider-within” position can serve as an empowering point of departure for black women to reshape the academic landscape by embracing their diversity and unleashing their potential (Govinder et al 2013; Farmer 2021). I would like to wrap up this section with the following quote: “We are on the cusp of a historical period characterized by multiple perspectives, disputed interpretations, paradigmatic debates, and emerging forms of expression. As we move further along this speculative path, and when its history is eventually chronicled, we will recognize that this era has been about liberation: liberation from what Hannah Arendt referred to as the “coercion of truth”, liberation from exclusively listening to the voices of Western Europe, liberation from generations of silence, and liberation from perceiving the world through a monochromatic lens,” as stated by Guba and Lincoln (2005:212).

5. Unravelling the origins of inner turmoil and interpersonal strife: Decoding the roots of conflicts

My hypothesis suggests that the origins of these conflicts and disputes among us can be traced back to the enduring scars left by colonization and segregation. These foundational wounds, while hidden from plain sight, continue to exert their influence, even as the visible racial divisions of the past remain discernible. It is when these visible lines blur that these concealed scars are reignited, burdening both individuals and society as a whole. We carry the weight of these lingering wounds from our history into the realms of the church and academia, thereby either obstructing transformation or perpetuating injustices. The subsequent narratives, which showcase instances of blurred lines, offer poignant illustrations of how these internal conflicts are incited:

- In December 2011, my sister from Gauteng visited me in Cape Town. She is a Methodist church member. She went to fellowship to

the Methodist church in Somerset that Sunday morning (the white church). She could not enter the church because she was told by one of the members in the parking lot that, “ there is a wonderful black pastor in the Methodist church Lwandle township, why don’t you go there? She left angry and came back home.

- In 2011, the owner of Doorn Poort Farm in KwaZulu-Natal gunned down Sipho Mbatha, whom he apparently thought was a dog.
- In a separate court case a farmer in 2011, Julie Crossberg shot dead his Zimbabwean farm worker. Crossberg also claimed he mistook his target for a baboon.
- In 2014, a farmer convicted for unlawful handling of a firearm was jailed for six months by the Musina Regional Court in Limpopo. Johannes Fourie shot and injured one of his workers, who he claimed he mistook for a baboon.
- In 2014, a 39-year-old Pretoria man was charged with murder for killing a 23-year-old farm worker in Modimolle, Limpopo, who he allegedly mistook for a warthog. It’s believed Hepburn and his wife were out hunting at a friend’s farm in Limpopo when he shot at the direction of a noise, thinking it was a warthog.
- In 2018, I drove from Fish Hoek, Cape Town, to attend my friend and sister’s licencing service in Wellington. I got lost and drove to the wrong church. As soon as I entered the congregants who were sitting in the bunch where I sat, left it and I was left alone with a huge space. I felt like I am a leper, people were running away from me when I wanted to ask direction to the church I was going to.
- In 2018, I was asked to bring water by the female professor, who thought that I am a cleaner in the academic conference venue I attended.
- In 2020, the Brackenfell High School was accused of racism after a group of white parents organised a farewell event for white pupils only.
- In 2022 – A disturbing incident where a black pupil was forced to bow on his knees several times before a fellow white pupil at Milnerton

High has rattled the school community, the management of the school, claimed that it was not a racism incident since the teacher who did that was an Indian deputy principal. That is far from the truth, it is still racism if one considers where the South African Indian people were placed and where they are today.

- In 2022, the incident of one student urinating to the belongings of another in Stellenbosch University (Penxa-Matholeni et al (2023).
- In 2023, Belinda Magor, a woman allegedly behind a voice note calling for blacks to be killed instead of pit bulls, has been arrested. Gauteng police have confirmed that a case of *crimen injuria* was opened on Friday at Boksburg North police station and transferred to Putfontein police station for investigation.¹

5.1 Conflict within is threatened

"Where do the conflicts and quarrels among you originate? Is it not from the passions that wage war within you?" (James 4:1, New English Translation).

Considering the question posed above, it appears that these conflicts stem from internal struggles and the passions that dwell within individuals. While I don't possess a definitive answer, I hypothesize that the foundation of South African democracy was constructed upon the festering wounds of colonization and apartheid. This hierarchical and segregated underpinning fails to provide a solid footing for democracy and equality, continuing to undermine the stability of this democratic system.

The incidents mentioned earlier seem to be incited when the lines dividing racial groups become blurred, particularly when black South Africans enter spaces traditionally not intended for them. This often leads to the emergence of resentment and hatred, ultimately resulting in the conflicts we witness.

Unfortunately, the church appears to be at ease with maintaining clear racial lines, raising questions about its commitment to opposing apartheid

1 All the above incidents are from The Citizen: <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/should> unless it is stated otherwise.

and advocating for justice. The challenge lies in whether the church has relinquished its fervour and willingness to make sacrifices for justice, settling instead for morsels from the colonial powers while the majority continues to grapple with adversity.

This is one of the reasons I believe that delving into the connection between Christianity and colonialism and apartheid would have been beneficial. The question remains: which church in South Africa has genuinely championed justice? We are aware that it was individuals within the church, such as Boesak and Tutu, who had the courage to call the church to account for justice, but did the church as an institution ever stand unequivocally for justice?

Likewise, the opening of academic doors to previously disadvantaged scholars may have led to complacency and contentment with the limited progress achieved. As for the church, it appears to echo the words of Isaiah (6:9–10), where people hear but do not understand, see but do not comprehend, and close their hearts, ears, and eyes, making it difficult for them to turn towards healing, as referenced in Matthew 13:14–15, Mark 4:12, Luke 8:10, and Acts 28:26–27.

As a nation, we may find ourselves in a situation akin to the one described in the Book of Isaiah, where we can hear about social injustices but struggle to fully understand and comprehend them. The struggles faced by black South African women on the margins may be visible, but grasping the full extent of their experiences proves to be a formidable challenge. To address these issues effectively, there is a pressing need for deeper introspection and soul-searching.

6. Charting the path ahead: The “endleleni” way forward

Mam Professor Oduyoye, the matriarch of the Circle of Concerned African Theologians (Circle), raises pivotal questions that warrant further exploration. She inquires, “Where and how do we chart our path ahead? How can we shape the future we aspire to when we refuse to acknowledge our past and are reluctant to look back? Without reflecting on our origins, we risk not comprehending our destination or the direction we must take.

To address these inquiries, I reintroduce the metaphor of “endleleni,” a liminal space where we encounter displacement, navigating through unfamiliar terrain without a defined roadmap. “Endleleni” situates South Africans as migratory individuals seeking escape from the confines of hatred, mistrust, resentment, racism, superficial peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness. Within this space, we find refuge from fear, racism, pain, and mistrust, and we embrace vulnerability while openly engaging with one another.

Within “endleleni”, prophetic figures such as Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, and Beyers Naude, who embody a righteous anger, can emerge. As argued by Wepener (2023), preachers, worshippers, and South Africans at large should embrace this anger and express it within society, academia, and the church. Despite the prevalence of anger in South Africa, we must be willing to listen to each other’s grievances. Recognizing that anger is often negatively perceived, Wepener proposes that those who benefited from colonization and apartheid should attentively listen to anger directed at them personally.

The creation of this space, characterized by paradox, discomfort, anger, and vulnerability, while maintaining a sense of safety, fosters a profound mode of relating to one another. It is within this space that we encounter the divine in the form of another human being. Here, we have the potential to construct a robust and wholesome foundation that dismantles hierarchies in all their manifestations.

7. Conclusion

James 4:1 raises a fundamental inquiry: What is the root of the conflicts and disputes among you? This article endeavours to provide an answer by delving into the historical context of the South African Group Areas Act, a policy that enforced racial segregation in South Africa. The enduring repercussions of this deeply entrenched and segregated foundation have left invisible scars that continue to influence our lives today. The visible racial boundaries on the South African landscape have triggered these concealed wounds, impacting our relationships within the church, academia, and society.

This article illuminates narratives that illustrate the internal conflicts and how they manifest as disputes among us. In response to these challenges, we introduce the “Endleleni” principle as a liminal space with the potential to dismantle existing hierarchies and establish a fresh, robust, and healthy foundation. “Endleleni” serves as a sanctuary where we can transcend our mutual distrust, both metaphorically and psychologically, and remain open to one another’s frustrations, even when they are directed personally.

Within the realm of “Endleleni”, we can not only acknowledge each other’s pain but also understand each other’s anger. It becomes a secure environment where we can address unresolved issues that contribute to conflicts within our communities and among us.

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