

Black Theology and Pan-Africanism: An interconnected journey towards liberation

**Author:**Zorodzai Dube¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Zorodzai Dube,
dubez@ufs.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 02 June 2025

Accepted: 09 Aug. 2025

Published: 15 Oct. 2025

How to cite this article:

Dube, Z., 2025, 'Black Theology and Pan-Africanism: An interconnected journey towards liberation', *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a10854. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10854>

Copyright:

© 2025. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

This article explores the intricate relationship between Black Theology and Pan-Africanism. The impetus behind this study is the resentment against the enduring legacy of historical oppression and the persistent sting of systemic discrimination experienced by individuals of African descent worldwide, as well as the perceived inadequacy of existing analytical frameworks to fully capture this complex phenomenon. As highlighted in this study, the greatest challenge for people of African descent is dehumanisation resulting from colonialism and racism, along with the ongoing struggle against neo-colonialism. The study is framed within the ideological concepts of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism, both of which advocate for the centrality of liberation, affirm the importance of identity and dignity, and emphasise the necessity of unity in overcoming oppressive structures. The article addresses the implicit research question of how these two paradigms intersect and contribute to the pursuit of liberation and self-determination. A major finding is the striking convergence of core tenets between Black Theology and Pan-Africanism, particularly their shared critique of oppressive power structures, their unwavering focus on liberation, and their emphasis on identity and self-respect as crucial elements of resistance.

Contribution: Considering these findings, the study argues that merging Black Theology with Pan-Africanism offers a more comprehensive and powerful approach to addressing the intricate challenges of black freedom.

Keywords: Pan-Africanism; Black Theology; racism; colonialism; unity; liberation.

Introduction

The human story is a rich, intricate tapestry of identity, belief and the ongoing struggle against oppression. From this crucible of history emerge two potent forces within the polyrhythms of the black diaspora: Black Theology and Pan-Africanism. Despite their apparent differences, these intellectual and spiritual movements share a profound resonance and a common genesis in the relentless pursuit of emancipation. This study embarks on an intellectual journey into their theoretical foundations, illuminating their historical origins and core tenets, while critically exploring the powerful possibilities for their convergence in the ongoing struggle for justice and self-determination.

Across the globe, individuals of African descent continue to face the long-entrenched vestiges of enforced servitude (i.e. slavery) and colonialism, as well as the fresh wound of systemic racism. These realities have not only required, but actively birthed strong and sustained intellectual and spiritual responses. As Cone (2018) powerfully articulated in his seminal work, traditional streams of Christian theology were inadequate in addressing the searing pain and relentless struggle of black individuals. It was within this profound void that Black Theology emerged, not as an additional theological sub-discipline, but as a crucial instrument of theological liberation. Concomitantly, the exploitative realities of colonial rule and the conscious dismemberment of African polities fostered the emergence of Pan-Africanism – a dynamic movement championing unity, independence and an unapologetic assertion of one's African heritage (Nkrumah 1963). Even now, in the contemporary world, the echoes of the past are very much a present reality, and there is an urgent need for paradigms that are not only spiritually soothing, but also resilient matrices for tangible social and political liberation.

Existing scholarship has, indeed, shed light on different aspects of both black theological thought and Pan-Africanism. Floyd-Thomas (2020), for instance, demonstrated the continued importance of Cone's work in contemporary discussions about racial justice, provocatively

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Black Theology and Africa: Liberation, Justice and the African Context', under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Mogomme Alpheus Masoga and Prof. Luvuyo Ntombana.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

concluding with a suggestion for the need to have a deeper conversation between Black Theology and global liberation movements in what he calls the 'Black Manifesto'. Wapmuk (2021) further persuasively argues for Pan-Africanism as a crucial framework for understanding diasporic identities, concluding that its principles are indispensable for fostering unity among people of African descent across the globe. Further contributing to this landscape, Hughes et al. (2015) argue that Black Theology's emphasis on identity offers a powerful counter-narrative to the dehumanising effects of racism, and that such an emphasis is not trivial to the role of identity in maintaining psychological well-being and in enlarging empowering spaces. A noteworthy study by Simms (2000) highlights the essence of community and group hierarchy as in Black Theology for resilience and collectivist action. Similarly, Chisita and Rusero (2016) also identify some of the Pan-Africanist aspirations to be fraught with difficulties at the community level, such as the problem of dealing with internal divisions and the persistent effects of colonial structures.

While these studies have undeniably enriched our knowledge of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism, a noticeable gap exists: no work has investigated the potential unity and synergy towards a single moral force that can help in the dismantling of oppressive and marginalising structures. In this study, such a distinctive contribution of dynamism and symbiosis is carved between these two powerful paradigms. The study argues that, together, their analyses provide a fuller and more powerful approach to dealing with the multi-dimensional struggles confronting people of African descent around the world. With that in mind, this article's animating purpose is to carefully unpack the theoretical and philosophical foundations of both Black Theology and Pan-Africanism, and most importantly, to problematise the possibility of incorporating the liberatory potential found in the double helix of both frameworks in the ongoing fight for liberation and self-determination.

This article is structured as follows. Firstly, the theoretical framework outlines an overview of the historical context, key figures and major principles of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism. Secondly, a literature review of historical intersections meticulously explores the significant points of convergence between these frameworks. Thirdly, thematic analyses are presented, engaging in a critical dialogue on the relevance of these frameworks in the ongoing global struggles for justice. Fourthly, the article discusses practical implications for a unified praxis of liberation. Fifthly, it analyses the challenges of navigating both internal conflicts and external pressures, encouraging readers to reflect on the transformative potential of their combined vision. Finally, the article concludes that the convergence of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism offers a comprehensive and effective approach to addressing the complex challenges of black liberation.

Interweaving (theorising) Black Theology and Pan-Africanism

To understand the complexities of black liberation struggles, it is necessary to examine the theoretical frameworks of both Black Theology and Pan-Africanism. Although distinct in focus, these frameworks are closely interconnected and provide valuable perspectives for analysing historical injustices and conceptualising pathways towards a more equitable future. This analysis is grounded in the foundational principles of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism. Black Theology, as a theological perspective, and Pan-Africanism, as a political and cultural movement, both emerged in response to the historical experiences of subjugation faced by people of African descent. However, while noting the potential benefit from combining the two perspectives, it is necessary to reveal, identify and be cognisant of their differences. Noticeably, Black Theology tends to focus on spiritual resistance propelled by an alternative hermeneutic based on the experiences of the oppressed. In this regard, it has a close relationship with the text (Bible). On the other hand, being critical and suspicious of religion, Pan-Africanism is a broader cultural and political project focused on the collective identity and experiences of African people around the globe. Therefore, while this article seeks to bring these perspectives together, it acknowledges their differing ideological implications.

While this text does not explicitly label this layered approach as a unique, unified theory, it argues for the synergistic potential of their combined insights on liberation, suggesting a theoretical convergence that provides a more comprehensive model of liberation that neither framework in isolation can offer.

The emergence of Black Theology as a distinct academic discipline owes much to the pioneering works of figures such as James Cone (Cone 2018, 2010), among others. Cone's seminal contributions, particularly in his early writings, spelt out a theology that spoke directly to the struggle for black freedom by calling out the silence or complicity of traditional Christianity to racial injustice. Katie Cannon later developed this conversation by placing the experiences of black women at the centre and, thus, emphasising the interrelationship between race and gender in shaping black women's soteriological and theological reflection (Cannon 2006). Pan-Africanism, by contrast, is a broader, more historical movement with a variety of parents. Its most recent manifestations were significantly shaped by figures such as Marcus Garvey, whose Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) championed black pride and unity throughout the diaspora (Garvey 1923), and Kwame Nkrumah, who framed Pan-Africanism as an essentiality for the political and economic liberation of the African continent from colonial rule (Nkrumah 1963). The rise of both frameworks can be understood as a direct response to the pervasive systems of racial oppression, colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, a fight that surpasses and precedes the ascendancy of industrial capitalism in Europe.

Black Theology simply means that God is black in the sense that divinity, *imago Dei*, is constitutive of the black people's experience. Hence, it is not outside the experiences of black people. It posits that the divine is intimately involved in the struggles for justice and liberation of the oppressed, and that genuine faith necessitates active participation in dismantling oppressive structures (Cone 2018). A key assumption is that the stories and narratives of black people, often marginalised and silenced, are crucial for a complete vision of God and salvation. Identity is paramount, encouraging black individuals to embrace their heritage and begin to understand themselves as being worthwhile in the eyes of God, and challenge the deadening stories of the oppressor (Boesak 2022; Biko 2002). Community is not merely a social gathering, but a vital site of resistance, solidarity and collective action towards freedom (Simms 2000).

Contrastingly, Pan-Africanism is based on the concept of a common history, culture and destiny among peoples of African descent, including those on the continent and in the diaspora. At the heart of the philosophy is that Africa must unite as one to overcome the inherent legacies of foreign domination from its past and continued interference by foreign powers (Nkrumah 1963). Identity in Pan-Africanism celebrates this shared heritage, fostering a sense of collective belonging and challenging the divisive tactics of colonial powers (Nkrumah 1963). Self-determination is a non-negotiable principle, asserting the right of African nations and peoples to govern themselves and control their resources without external imposition (Nkrumah 1963).

These theories are profoundly relevant for this study because they provide a critical lens through which to understand both the historical and ongoing struggles for black people. Black Theology locates this struggle in a spiritual and moral duty, providing a theological justification for resistance and a vision of divine solidarity with, and for, the oppressed. Meanwhile, Pan-Africanism provides a political and cultural template for collective action (i.e. mobilising across borders), highlighting the essentiality of solidarity and self-determination in the face of systemic injustices. This study has chosen these theories because they directly address the multifaceted nature of black liberation by incorporating the spiritual and material dimensions of the struggle. They move beyond facial readings of white racism; they delve into the deeper theological and political implications of oppression, giving pathways to emancipation.

These theories are critically used to speak to the key problem in this article, which revolves around the historical and contemporary challenges faced by black communities in their struggle for freedom and justice, as captured in the contemporary slogan: *#Black Lives Matter*. Black Theology contributes by not only critiquing the systems that perpetuate oppression, but by offering a framework for how spiritual damage is inflicted by racism, and by calling for a faith that actively seeks justice. It serves to express the moral necessity behind the struggle for freedom (Floyd-Thomas 2020). Pan-Africanism adds by reminding the

interconnectedness and universality of black experiences, and places emphasis on collective responses. It provides a framework for understanding the demands for unity, solidarity and self-determination as crucial elements in dismantling oppressive structures and in building a more humane and equitable future (Wapmuk 2021). In unison, these theories constitute a powerful and virtually complete response to the complex predicaments through which black liberation is possible, suggesting that genuine freedom requires both a spiritual awakening and united political action. This study argues that when Black Theology and Pan-Africanism are read together, such convergence constitutes a more potent approach to liberation than either one framework taken in isolation, thus adding to a more holistic response to the ongoing problem of oppression.

Historical intersections

To fully appreciate the profound interconnectedness of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism, it is essential to delve into their historical trajectories and the shared crucibles of experience that forged their core tenets. While they had different origins (i.e. geographically) and perceptions concerning the role of religion (Christian faith), both movements grew out of deep-seated responses to the dehumanising forces of slavery, of colonialism and of persistent racial oppression. Our understanding of these historical intersections sheds light upon the rich soil from which theoretical and experiential convergences in the liberatory project continue to grow.

Black Theology's roots in African–American experience

The birth of Black Theology is integrally associated with the pain and suffering of the African–Americans in the United States of America (USA). Born from the fiery furnace of slavery, segregation and unabated systemic oppression, this theological ideology arose as a radical critique of a Christianity that was all too often co-opted to validate the very systems of injustice that it should have condemned (Cone 2018). Black theologians confronted the deep paradox of a faith tradition that preached liberation while tolerating the brutal subjugation of black people.

Within this context, theological perspectives were formulated that directly confronted the sufferings and survival of the oppressed. Figures such as Howard Thurman, although not strictly a 'black theologian', in the later academic sense, nonetheless deeply impacted its formation, emphasising the spiritual fortitude and inner resources developed by black people in the face of profound hardships (Thurman 2022). Thurman's work, highlights to us the complexities and challenges associated with being a black person within a global capitalistic context (Thurman 2022). In short, through these unimaginable trials, Black Theology implicitly presented God not as a distant observer, but as a liberator intimately involved with the plight of the marginalised. This theological foundation, emerging from the experiences of

African-Americans, would form the basis of the central thesis of Black Theology: that God is unequivocally on the side of the oppressed, and that genuine faith necessitates active participation in the fight for justice. It was a theology forged in the fires of adversity, seeking to find meaning, hope and a divine imperative for liberation within the context of racial bondage and discrimination.

Pan-Africanism's evolution

Meanwhile, Pan-African thought underwent a significant evolution, deeply influenced by the ravages of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, which dispersed people of African descent across the globe. The collective trauma of colonial domination and the systematic fragmentation of African polities generated strong feelings of urgency around the need for unity among people of African descent, both on the continent and abroad (Nkrumah 1963). This shared historical narrative, marked by exploitation and resistance, became a powerful unifying force.

The rise of Pan-African consciousness was visible in multiple intellectual and political developments in the early 20th century. Indeed, the Harlem Renaissance, for example, was not only essentially a cultural and artistic movement, but it also constituted an affirming assertion of black identity and common cultural heritage, fostering a sense of pride and interconnectedness among African-Americans, and globally, people of African descent (Barrett 1997). Subsequent civil rights and *Black Power* movements in the USA further underscored the interconnectedness of struggles for liberation, drawing parallels between the fight against racial discrimination in America and the anti-colonial movements sweeping across Africa. This transformation marked a growing recognition that the liberation of people of African descent, no matter their physical location, was a collective project that would demand solidarity and an affirmation of a shared vision.

Shared narratives

Importantly, despite their different origins and initial emphases, Black Theology and Pan-Africanism share fundamental truths and overarching goals that underscore their inherent compatibility and potential for synergy. Underpinning both frameworks is the prevailing commitment to social justice, the unwavering affirmation of identity and the relentless pursuit of liberation from the shackles of systemic oppression (Cone 2010; Nkrumah 1963). They unequivocally advocate for the inherent dignity and worthiness of black individuals and communities, challenging the pervasive dehumanisation that has been a hallmark of racist and colonial ideologies (Boesak 1977; Nkrumah 1963).

Both Black Theology and Pan-Africanism emphasise spiritual and cultural rebirth, a return to self, and the integration of the struggle for justice with individual and collective identity. Black Theology affirms the divine image within black people

and acknowledges their shared history, offering a spiritual foundation for self-worth. Meanwhile, Pan-Africanism celebrates this shared history and culture, providing a collective framework for identity affirmation (Hughes et al. 2015; Wapmuk 2021). This convergence highlights a shared understanding that true liberation is not solely a political or economic endeavour, but also a psychospiritual quest for freedom that requires a radical affirmation of black humanity in the face of forces that have sought to invalidate it.

Thematic analysis

The deep consonance of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism is most compellingly revealed through their shared thematic concerns, which resonate deeply with the centuries of struggle among people of African descent for liberation. These shared themes provide a powerful and integrated framework for understanding the interconnected journey towards justice and self-determination. Let us delve into these pivotal points of intersection.

Identity and self-determination

Both Black Theology and Pan-Africanism emphasise self-awareness and self-affirmation as essential steps in the fight for liberation, as important as the Bible itself. Black Theology, powerfully articulated by figures such as James Cone, boldly asserts the inestimable worth and dignity of black people in the eyes of the divine (Cone 2022:78–82). This theological affirmation serves as a potent counter-narrative to the dehumanising effects of racism and colonialism, which have historically sought to strip black individuals of their self-respect and cultural heritage (Boesak 2022). By encouraging black individuals to embrace their 'blackness' not as a mark of inferiority, but as constitutive of their very humanity, Black Theology fosters a spiritual and cultural identity vital for psychological well-being and empowerment (Hughes et al. 2015). This is not just an internal spiritual process; it is an act of radical self-affirmation in a world that has sought to erase one's very experience as a black person.

Similarly, Pan-Africanism is deeply rooted in the imperative to reclaim African identity from the distortions and denigration imposed by colonial powers (Nkrumah 1963). Its agenda is to champion black pride and unity across the diaspora, fostering a collective consciousness based on a shared history, culture and destiny (i.e. common fate of black people) (Wapmuk 2021). This reclamation of black identity is not merely an act of cultural preservation, but also a matter of political necessity, empowering communities to assert their own existential claims, make choices on their own destinies and resist external impositions (Nkrumah 1963). The compelling convergence lies in the shared understanding that both spiritual and cultural self-affirmation are not merely desirable but are, in fact, indispensable prerequisites for achieving genuine liberation and self-determination. As Cone (2022) argues, understanding oneself as a black person within the context of oppressive societal structures is foundational for liberation, a sentiment echoed by Pan-

Africanists who see the reclaiming of African identity (i.e. casting their eyes towards Africa to reclaim their Afrocentric roots) as essential for collective empowerment.

Liberation and justice

The refusal to compromise on the pursuit of liberation and justice is the raw impulse animating Black Theology and Pan-Africanism. Black Theology unequivocally positions God on the side of the oppressed (i.e. insists that God takes sides) and asserts that true faith has to include active engagement in dismantling oppressive structures that keep people oppressed (Cone 2018). As a paradigmatic event of divine liberation, the Exodus narrative provides a powerful theological justification for resistance and a compelling vision of divine solidarity with those who suffer under injustice (Boesak 1977). This focus on socio-political liberation dovetails seamlessly with the goals of Pan-African political movements, which advocate for systemic change to overcome the 'legacies of colonialism' and ongoing exploitation (Nkrumah 1963). As Malcolm X so powerfully articulated (1973:56–60), the liberation struggle is a basic human right, a human need to have dignity, a sentiment that resonates deeply with both theological and political calls for justice.

Both models acknowledge the critical importance of not only challenging the specific incidents of prejudice and discrimination but also, and perhaps more importantly, dismantling the systemic structures that perpetuate oppression. The prophetic voice within Black Theology encourages active participation in social movements and impassioned advocacy (i.e. active partisanship) for the marginalised (Floyd-Thomas 2020), while Pan-Africanism galvanises collective action and political mobilisation, and the demand for concrete political reforms and self-rule (Nkrumah 1963). The common and shared commitment to dismantle oppressive structures speaks to the powerful potential of the combined use of these approaches in current liberation struggles.

Community and solidarity

The concept of community and solidarity is paramount and deeply embedded in both Black Theology and Pan-Africanism, serving as vital sites of resistance, support and collective action. It has been argued by black theologians that strengthening formation is not realised only in communities of faith as the status quo, but rather they are instruments in the hands of God used for freedom and produce communities which would fight for social change (Simms 2000). Parallel to this view of the religious community as a home or haven – a place to network with oppressed people and an organisation for liberation – Simms argues that faith communities are not merely sanctuaries where individuals escape oppression; rather, they are spaces where traditional practices are challenged and acculturation occurs (Simms 2000). The shared experience of suffering under oppression coalesces into a powerful bond of agapeic love that transcends individual

circumstances, fostering a sense of mutual support and a shared purpose among community members (Boesak 1977).

Similarly, Pan-Africanism appeals for an emphatic solidarity between African nations and black peoples across the globe, recognising the undeniable interconnectedness of their struggles and the imperative necessity of combining efforts to combat common threats (Wapmuk 2021). The principle of unity, as championed by Nkrumah (1963), is presented as the *sine qua non* against external interference as well as the necessary precondition for collective advancement. While challenges to achieving this unity undeniably exist, such as internal divisions and the persistence of colonial (and/or apartheid) structures (Chisita & Rusero 2016), the ideal of solidarity remains a core and enduring tenet. The convergence of these frameworks highlights the idea that liberation is not an individual pursuit, but a collective effort. It underscores the importance of communal engagement, mutual support and sustained commitment from a united community. As Achebe urges (2000:44–50), it is in the strength of a community that unity and the ability to act collectively become possible – core principles essential for both spiritual and political liberation.

Practical implications: Towards a unified praxis of liberation

Moving beyond the realm of theoretical convergence, the interweaving of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism presents compelling practical implications for contemporary struggles for liberation. This section delves into how these interconnected perspectives can inform and empower concrete (practical) action, with particular attention paid to how Black Theology can inspire activism and how the role of educational outreach and community building is essential in establishing Pan-African unity.

Black Theology as a framework for empowered activism

Black Theology of Liberation, with its unrelenting focus on the emancipation of the oppressed and its inherent theological mandate for justice, provides a potent and indispensable framework for today's activism. Its core message – that the divine is unequivocally aligned with those who are marginalised – offers rich spiritual sustenance and a strong moral rationale for resisting oppressive systems. The influence of Black Theology on social-resistance movements has, historically speaking, an undeniable one. Seminal figures such as the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., deeply embedded within black theological traditions, powerfully showed how faith can serve as a formidable catalyst for socio-political transformation, mobilising citizens and providing the moral compass for non-violent resistance.

More importantly, when Black Theology is consciously and intentionally interwoven with Pan-African values, its potential for amplifying the voices of oppressed

communities is significantly enhanced (i.e. the way is paved for its effective work in what it means to give voice to the voiceless). Contemporary movements, such as the *#Black Lives Matter* campaign, can be understood as a dynamic manifestation of a synthesis in 'a state of becoming'. While rooted in the specific historical and ongoing context of racial injustice within the USA, its core tenets – the unequivocal affirmation of black identity, the urgent demand for justice and the insistent call for systemic change – resonate deeply with both black theological affirmations of inherent worth and Pan-African calls for collective self-determination (Cullors 2016:205–210). This overlap provides a more intersectional and nuanced context for understanding and effectively challenging the multi-layered nature of anti-black racism, recognising its deep historical roots in colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade and its persistent perpetuation of contemporary state-sanctioned violence and widespread systemic inequality. Indeed, Black Theology furnishes the spiritual grounding and moral urgency for resistance, while Pan-Africanism provides the diagnostic lens of global solidarity and the essential insight that our struggles are interconnected to draw these anti-colonial struggles together across the diaspora.

Educational outreach, community building and the cultivation of Pan-African consciousness

The development of a strong, unified Pan-African identity is unequivocally essential for the realisation of liberation's goals. Faith-based institutions, often deeply embedded within black communities, are uniquely positioned to play a leading and transformative role in this process through comprehensive educational outreach and diligent community-building initiatives. As Nkrumah (1963) so powerfully underscored saying that given the damaging effects of colonial education on African identity, contemporary efforts must actively (i.e. consciously take pains to resist) and deliberately counter these legacies by developing curricula firmly rooted in the shared histories, cultures and lived experiences of Africans and their diasporas.

These educational initiatives should transcend mere historical recounting, actively engaging with the deep and enduring ways in which faith has shaped and sustained black communities in the face of relentless oppression. There is a wealth of theological resources of liberation found within Black Theology, alongside the powerful historical narratives of resistance and resilience embedded within the Pan-African tradition that can contribute significantly towards a stronger collective identity and a deeper, more nuanced understanding of shared struggles and aspirations. The ongoing relevance of faiths that centralise these narratives, coupled with the challenges faced by contemporary people of African descent – whose modern embodiments appear across various geographies and denominations – creates opportunities and new spaces for collective action to be envisioned and pursued (Harris 2018). They can create an indelible groundwork for the kind of Pan-African unity that Nkrumah envisioned as

indispensable for genuine liberation and authentic self-determination by cultivating a commitment to shared consciousness based on spiritual affirmation and historical understanding.

Challenges and critiques: Navigating internal strife and external pressures

Black Theology and Pan-Africanism are powerful theoretical frameworks and practical pathways towards liberation, but their respective journeys are invariably marked by significant challenges. Both movements, forged in the crucible of oppression (i.e. movements under duress), must continually navigate the complexities of their internal disagreements and the ceaseless pressures exerted by imperial forces seeking to maintain the status quo (i.e. the imperial centre's effort to accommodate itself in this framework of power and authority). To understand these hurdles is to appreciate the ongoing dynamism and tenacity of these liberation frameworks.

Internal conflicts within Black Theology

Black Theology, despite its foundational commitment to the liberation of the oppressed, is, by no means, a monolithic entity. Indeed, it is characterised by a lively, albeit sometimes fractious, landscape of conflicting interpretations and internal disagreements. As a source of intellectual richness, this intrinsic multiplicity is eminently positive but is also a major difficulty: it may potentially result in divisions in scholarship and practice. As West (1993) incisively observed, a critical concern lies in 'the danger of reducing the black experience to some essence' and in neglecting the 'vital nuances of race and class and gender, sexual preference and nuances of spirituality' (pp. 132–135). This critique reveals the necessity of ensuring that Black Theology remains capacious enough to encompass the varied realities of black lives, preventing any single narrative from dominating and potentially marginalising other valid experiences of oppression and liberation. Furthermore, the very definition of 'blackness' within a global context can itself emerge as an object of scholarly and practical contention, foregrounding the distinct, yet interconnected experiences of people of African descent across diverse continents and diasporic locations. The ongoing vitality of Black Theology depends on an honest and liberatory navigation of these internal dialogues.

Pan-African challenges

The Pan-African movement, a trans-continental, centuries-long political and cultural initiative, has, of course, historically faced and will continue to struggle with tremendous obstacles in achieving and, perhaps more pertinently, sustaining genuine unity, as is the current case in the African Union and the 'Traore effect'. Critiques of past Pan-African initiatives often highlight a striking gap between the inspiring rhetoric of unity and the reality of its value, and the messy process of putting it into practice. This gap, as Safran (1991) has claimed, can undermine the movement's broader goals (pp. 83–99).

The sheer disparities among African nations and diasporic communities – encompassing variations in political systems, levels of economic development and distinct historical trajectories – introduce considerable complexities into efforts to significantly establish and maintain genuine solidarity. Moreover, the persistent effects of globalisation, manifesting in economic dependencies and various forms of external political interference (a concern presciently echoed by Nkrumah [1963]), continue to undermine the effort to form a truly united front. Internal divisions, too often tragically exacerbated by the lingering effects of arbitrarily drawn colonial borders, imposed with no regard to traditional ethnic structures, and by pre-existing ethnic rivalries, have been major stumbling blocks in the way of realising the full potential of the Pan-African dream.

Response strategies: Seeking unity through shared principles and inclusive visions

Despite these formidable challenges, both Black Theology and Pan-Africanism offer inherent response strategies for navigating their internal and external critiques, demonstrating a remarkable capacity for adaptation and resilience. Black Theology, precisely because of its inherent focus on the experiences of the oppressed and its commitment to a liberating God, can provide constructive frameworks for acknowledging, engaging with and ultimately reconciling diverse perspectives within the movement. Fostering a more inclusive understanding of liberation that explicitly incorporates the nuances of intersecting identities, as articulated by critiques such as West's, is not merely a matter of academic rectitude, but a tactical strategy for strengthening the movement's internal solidarity and ensuring its continued relevance to all members of the black community. Furthermore, a conscious return to shared spiritual principles, focusing on the common vision of justice, equity and the basic recognition of black humanity (Boesak 1977), can serve as a powerful unifying force, capable of bridging scholarly and practical divides and reasserting the inherent power of Black Theology as an emancipatory force.

A description of relevant Pan-African principles in the 1960s, particularly the unwavering insistence on unity and self-determination (Nkrumah 1963), provides response strategies to both external aggressions and to internal divisions. Given the ongoing impact of neo-colonialism on the continent (Nkrumah 1963), this necessitates a revisioning of the collective and mutual solidarity that ought to exist among all people of African descent across the globe. By persistently emphasising our shared history and a common destiny (as outlined in the theoretical framing), Pan-Africanism, despite a context marked by the constant threat of division based on national and regional differences, can continue to inspire solidarity, reminding individuals of their interconnectedness in the face of external forces seeking to divide them. Individuals face common challenges posed by external forces and therefore share a mutual interest in collective resistance and solidarity. Furthermore, the conscious incorporation of the theological insights of Black Theology, such as the

emphasis on solidarity in suffering and the theological necessity of justice (Boesak 1977), can provide a vital, moral and spiritual basis for political unity, which taps into a far greater subjective sense of shared purpose that transcends purely pragmatic concerns. Ultimately, moving through these difficult challenges needs to be guided by an ongoing commitment to open dialogue, critical self-reflection and flexibility in strategies, but tethered firmly to the unwavering and foundational struggle for liberation for all African peoples.

Conclusion

This article examines the interrelated dimensions of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism. The analysis finds that, although distinct, both frameworks provide valuable theoretical foundations for understanding and engaging with the struggle for liberation. As depicted by Nkrumah (1963) and Boesak (1977), the most profound activity and situation of life and death lay in the struggle for survival beyond the pale of the colonial situation. Spoken within the contexts of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism, the article asserted that liberation was central rather than marginal; a matter of identity, self-respect and unity; rather than that which can be appropriated; and that liberation addresses oppressive structures rather than attempting to accommodate within such structures. The article responded to the implicit research question of how these two frameworks intersect and can contribute to the goal of liberation and self-determination. Based on the analysis, a major finding was the striking convergence of central themes of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism, particularly their shared critique of oppressive power structures, their unwavering focus on liberation, and their emphasis on identity and self-respect as crucial aspects of resistance. This article discusses the main topic by interweaving the theoretical insights of key figures such as James Cone (2018), Kwame Nkrumah (1963) and Allan Boesak (1977), demonstrating how their perspectives on dehumanisation, power, liberation, identity and unity throw light on the interconnectedness of these two powerful movements. Through different epistemologies, this study concludes that the confluence of Black Theology and Pan-Africanism provides a holistic and palatable praxis to respond to the complex challenges of black liberation.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

Z.D. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

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

Data availability

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

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

- Achebe, C., 2000, *Things fall apart: Classics in context*, Anchor Books, New York, NY.
- Barrett, A.R.D., 1997, *Honoring the ancestors: Historical reclamation and self-determined identities in Richmond and Rio de Janeiro*, UMI Dissertation Publishing, Richmond, Virginia.
- Biko, S., 2002, *I write what I like: Selected writings*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Boesak, A.A., 1977, *Farewell to innocence: A socio-ethical study on Black theology and power*, Orbis, Maryknoll, New York, NY.
- Boesak, A.A., 2022, *Selfless revolutionaries: Biko black consciousness, Black Theology, and a global ethics of solidarity and resistance*, African Sun Media, Devonvallei, Stellenbosch.
- Cannon, K., 2006, *Black womanist ethics*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR.
- Chisita, C.T. & Rusero, A.M., 2016, 'Challenges and opportunities of reinforcing the Pan-African movement in the advent of globalization', in T. Abdul-Raheem (ed.), *Re-engaging the African Diasporas: Pan-Africanism in the Age of Globalization*, pp. 161–178, Cambridge Publishers, Cambridge.
- Cone, J.H., 2010, *A Black theology of liberation*, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Cone, J.H., 2018, *Black theology and Black power*, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Cone, J.H., 2022, *The spirituals and the blues*, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Cullors, P., 2016, *When they call you a terrorist: A black lives matter memoir*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY.
- Floyd-Thomas, J.M., 2020, 'Black liberation theology and the "Black manifesto": Reflections on race, racial injustice, and religion a half century later', *Black Theology Papers Project* 6(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.52214/btpp.v6i1.12463>
- Garvey, M., 1923, *Philosophy and opinions of Marcus Garvey*, Universal Publishing House, Malborne.
- Harris, W.M. Sr., 2018, 'African American men's theological perspectives', *Western Journal of Black Studies* 41(3–4), 119–136.
- Hughes, M., Kiecolt, K.J., Keith, V.M. & Demo, D.H., 2015, 'Racial identity and well-being among African-Americans', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 78(1), 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272514554043>
- Malcolm, X., 1973, *The autobiography of Malcolm X*, Random House, New York.
- Nkrumah, K., 1963, *Africa must unite*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, NY.
- Safran, W., 1991, 'Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return', *Diaspora* 1(1), 83–99.
- Simms, R., 2000, 'Black theology – A weapon in the struggle for freedom: A Gramscian analysis', *Race and Society* 2(2), 165–193. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-9524\(00\)00014-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-9524(00)00014-0)
- Thurman, H., 2022, *Jesus and the disinherited*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.
- Wapmuk, S., 2021, 'Pan-Africanism in the 21st century: African Union and the challenges of cooperation and integration in Africa', *Brazilian Journal of International Relations* 10(2), 283–311. <https://doi.org/10.36311/2237-7743.2021.v10n2.p283-311>
- West, C., 1993, *Race matters*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.