

Healing the Wounds of Theological Exclusion: *Inxeba Elingaphakathi*¹ and the Nicene Creed

Nobuntu Penxa-Matholeni

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9874-9164>

- Department of Practical Theology and Missiology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa
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Abstract

The Nicene Creed (325 CE) has shaped Christian orthodoxy but also marginalised African indigenous religious voices. Despite Africa’s foundational roles in early Christianity, its spiritual traditions were largely excluded from the Creed’s theological formulations. This paper engages inxeba elingaphakathi (the invisible wound) to explore how such exclusion disrupted indigenous knowledge and practices. Using African epistemologies, indigenous storytelling, naming, and proverbs, the study asks how the Creed can be reread to heal rather than silence African voices, and what confessing “one faith” means when grounded in justice, inclusion, and holistic healing. Rereading the Creed through the lens of inxeba elingaphakathi challenges historical erasure, restores dignity to marginalised perspectives, and proposes a path toward theological inclusion, allowing Africa’s spiritual imagination, languages, and lived experiences to shape the global Christian narrative.

Keywords: Indigenous Storytelling; Inxeba elingaphakathi; African Theology; The Nicene Creed; Pastoral Care; Theological Inclusion

Introduction

Inxeba elingaphakathi (Penxa-Matholeni 2025), from isiXhosa, meaning “invisible wound,” describes a wound that cannot be seen with the physical eye because it exists within. Yet its impact on those who carry it is profound, shaping how we walk, speak, carry ourselves, and believe. Carrying such a wound can manifest in two ways. Some endure it silently, ignoring the pain until they become numb or immune—accepting the wound without questioning its cause or seeking healing—an approach that is ultimately destructive for the bearer. Others react spontaneously with anger or frustration, often without clear direction, which can be harmful to themselves and those around them.

In this paper, *inxeba elingaphakathi* reflects the deep ache left when a story is told without us, when a foundation is laid without our presence, and when faith structures are

¹ The wound that is inside.

built with our bodies at the margins (Penxa-Matholeni 2025). For many African Christians, this wound is woven into the creeds we recite, including the Nicene Creed, which has been a cornerstone of Christian orthodoxy for centuries (Pelikan 1971). It illustrates how African communities have often become accustomed—or even immune—to this pain.

Formulated in the fourth century, the Nicene Creed emerged from theological debates and imperial politics far removed from African contexts, despite Christianity's early flourishing in Egypt, Ethiopia, and North Africa (Bediako 2000; Mbiti 1970). Its final wording did not carry the rhythm of African languages, the cadence of African prayers, or the insights of African indigenous cosmologies and women's theologies (Hinga 2002; Chisale 2021). This absence is not merely historical; it continues to shape how African Christians engage their faith and how Africa is positioned in global theological discourse.

This paper responds to that silence and African immunity to the pain of *inxeba elingaphakathi*. It explores the Nicene Creed through African indigenous religion and pastoral theology, asking how this ancient confession can be re-read to promote justice, inclusion, and holistic healing. Drawing on indigenous storytelling methodology, the discussion moves between memory and critique, lament and hope, addressing the theological exclusion that has long marked Africa's engagement with the Creed (Smith 2012).

A re-reading of the Nicene Creed from an African perspective is not an act of rebellion against tradition but of deep faithfulness—faithfulness to the God who is present in every culture and language, calling the church to embody justice, mercy, and wholeness (Bediako 2000). In this way, the invisible wound of exclusion may begin to heal, and the Creed can become not only a statement of belief but a living testimony embracing the fullness of the Body of Christ (Pelikan 1971; Chisale 2021).

Historical Context

The Nicene Creed emerged in the charged atmosphere of the fourth century, formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE and later refined at the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE (Pelikan 1971:141–143). Convened under the patronage of Emperor Constantine, these gatherings aimed to resolve disputes about the nature of Christ—particularly the Arian controversy—and to unify the Christian faith under a single doctrinal statement (Pelikan 1971:141–143; Mbiti 1970).

Africa's relationship with the Creed is both foundational and marginalised. The continent had nurtured some of the earliest influential Christian thinkers, including Athanasius of Alexandria, Tertullian of Carthage, and Augustine of Hippo (Bediako 2000). Their theological contributions profoundly shaped global Christianity. Yet, the councils producing the Creed were largely imperial events, with participation determined by political proximity and ecclesial power, concentrated in the Mediterranean north and east. Sub-Saharan Africa, despite its vibrant Christian presence, was not meaningfully represented in the formulation process (Mbiti 1970; Hinga 1992).

This geographical and cultural gap meant that while African bishops contributed to theological debates, wider African cosmologies, languages, and indigenous knowledge systems were largely absent from the Creed's conceptual framework (Bediako 2000;

Chisale 2021). The result is a doctrinal text shaped by Greco-Roman thought, imperial authority, and Hellenistic philosophy, rather than African epistemologies or worldviews.

As Christianity spread deeper into Africa through colonial mission work, the Nicene Creed arrived as a fixed, authoritative formula—often detached from the local contexts in which it was being received (Mbiti 1970). Its absence of African narrative, imagery, and indigenous frameworks reinforced subtle theological hierarchies, where European expressions of faith were positioned as normative and African expressions as secondary or suspect (Bediako 2000; Chisale 2021).

Engaging this history is not about dismissing the Creed but about re-opening it. When the African context is re-centred, the Creed can be re-heard in ways that affirm the dignity, wisdom, and theological agency of African peoples (Pelikan 1971: 141–143).

***Inxeba Elingaphakathi* and Theological Exclusion**

In isiXhosa, *inxeba elingaphakathi*, as mentioned earlier, refers to a wound that is not visible but is deeply felt in the heart, spirit, and communal body (Penxa-Matholeni 2025). Unlike a physical injury, this wound resists easy diagnosis or healing because it is often ignored, dismissed, or misnamed. It is a pain carried quietly, sometimes across generations, without acknowledgment from those who caused it or those who might bring relief. The wound shapes the life of its carrier, influencing how one walks, speaks, believes, and engages with the world.

The African relationship to the Nicene Creed bears a deep theological wound. The exclusion of African cosmologies, languages, and sacred narratives from the Creed's formulation left a scar that is both historical and existential (Chisale 2021; Bediako 2000). African believers may recite the Creed faithfully yet feel it speaking in a voice not fully their own. Internalised marginality emerges when theological legitimacy is measured against imported categories, constraining African imagination within someone else's story (Mbiti 1970). As Behera (2024) observes, when creeds are universalised without contextual translation, they risk functioning as instruments of colonising power rather than witnesses to the inclusive nature of faith. Chisale (2021) illustrates how such exclusion continues to shape lived experiences today, particularly for women with disabilities, highlighting the ongoing impact of historical theological marginalisation.

Colonial Christianity deepened this wound. The Creed arrived in African churches through missionary structures that often-dismissed indigenous spiritualities as pagan or demonic (Goduka 1999). Over time, African Christians learned to translate their faith through foreign concepts rather than express it through metaphors, symbols, and communal rituals rooted in African life (Bediako 2000; Hebera 2024). Like *inxeba elingaphakathi*, this exclusion operates quietly but powerfully, shaping theological education, worship, and pastoral care. It affects how African theologians write, how African Christians pray, and how African communities imagine God. The wound is not only about what was omitted in the fourth century but also about how that omission continues to determine whose voices are heard, whose questions are validated, and whose visions of God are trusted in the life of theology (Penxa-Matholeni 2025; Penxa-Matholeni 2024).

Biblical texts demonstrate the communal dimensions of exclusion and responsibility. Rosner (1999:25–30) highlights that in Deuteronomy 19:13–21 and 1 Corinthians 5:13b, the community bears responsibility for the presence of wrongdoing (“so that it may go

well with you”), showing that exclusion affects both individuals and the collective. Similarly, the marginalisation of African voices in the Creed is not only an individual hurt but a communal wound, affecting the integrity and solidarity of African theological praxis.

The concept of exclusion is not merely theological but also socio-political. Graham (2000) notes that social exclusion is multifaceted, systemic, and linked to participation and empowerment. Exclusion is experienced not only as poverty or marginalisation but also as the denial of agency, voice, and recognition within a community. By drawing on Graham, *inxeba elingaphakathi* can be understood as a form of social and ecclesial exclusion, where African theological voices have been silenced and marginalised, both historically and in contemporary ecclesial structures.

Naming *inxeba elingaphakathi* is therefore a theological, ethical, and social act. As Ob (2015) shows, African names encode relational, ethical, and spiritual realities, and naming the wound situates marginalised experiences within networks of communal and divine accountability. Storytelling, when coupled with naming, makes silenced experiences visible and interpretable (Olojede 2014). Van Klinken (2018) emphasises that this naming empowers those historically excluded to participate actively in theological reflection. Osei-Tutu (2022) highlights the relational and participatory dimensions of naming, restoring meaning and integrating marginalised voices into broader theological discourse.

By naming the invisible wound in relation to the Nicene Creed, African theologians open the path for reinterpretation that does not erase the Creed’s core confession of Christ but re-roots it in African soil, drawing life from African languages, metaphors, and ways of knowing (Chisale 2021; Penxa-Matholeni 2022). In doing so, the Creed can be re-read to affirm the dignity, wisdom, and theological agency of African believers, beginning the process of communal, social, and spiritual healing.

African Indigenous Theological Perspectives

Beyond naming, African proverbs also serve as vehicles for cosmological and ethical knowledge. As Ob (2015) notes, a name can often condense the meaning of a proverb, linking the individual to broader cosmological events and communal wisdom. Names are not the only way to track or encode cosmological and theological knowledge; proverbs also serve this function, reflecting the communal philosophy of *umntu ngumntu ngabantu*—“alone I am an individual, but through others, I become a full person and flourish together with others.” Proverbs, like names, articulate the values, relationships, and spiritual realities that shape life, providing another lens through which the community understands God, justice, and relationality. In the context of indigenous storytelling, integrating proverbs alongside naming practices enriches the narrative, situating personal and communal experiences within the larger tapestry of African cosmology and theological reflection.

Indigenous Storytelling as Method, Theology, and Healing

Indigenous storytelling is more than narrative technique; it is a way of knowing, a method, and a pathway to healing. As Penxa-Matholeni (2022) notes, storytelling honours relational ethics—consent, reciprocity, accountability—memory work, and communal discernment. Testimony is gathered through spoken word, song, dance,

naming, and gesture, each recognised as a vessel of theological meaning. Similarly, Osei-Tutu (2022) emphasises that the African Oral Traditional Storytelling (AOTS) framework positions participants as co-creators of knowledge, framing storytelling as both methodological and theological, grounded in African philosophies, languages, and worldviews.

Storytelling functions as theology by articulating who God is through lived encounter. It combines doxology and doctrine: stories interpret God's action, and in telling them, the community confesses faith. Van Klinken (2018) demonstrates that autobiographical storytelling allows marginalised voices to shape theological reflection and challenge dominant narratives. In African contexts, indigenous storytelling enables community members, including widows and other marginalised groups, to articulate lived experiences and theological meaning, reframing pastoral care from individual "fixing" to intergenerational communal care.

Healing Through Storytelling: Naming, Weaving, and Sending

- **Naming the wound** – giving language to what was silenced, including grief, stigma, and dispossession. Names carry profound ontological and spiritual significance, connecting individuals to the divine, the community, and the cosmos (Ob 2015). By naming wounds, the storytelling process restores dignity and situates individuals within relational and spiritual accountability.
- **Weaving the fragments** – holding memory, scripture, and culture together so that meaning emerges without denying pain. Storytelling enables communities to braid experiences, traditional knowledge, and theological insight, creating narratives that both preserve and interpret communal memory (Olojede 2014).
- **Sending with dignity** – restoring voice and agency; re-inscribing community members as theologians, not merely as recipients of care. Through story circles, ritual naming, liturgical testimonies, and scriptural re-hearings, marginalised voices interpret texts in their own idiom, ensuring their wisdom shapes communal and theological understanding (Osei-Tutu 2022).

Practically, this entails story circles, liturgical testimonies, ritual naming (including terms such as *umhlokokazi*), and metaphorical and performative expressions of memory and theology. The measure of truth here is restorative: does the telling mend relationships, return dignity, and open paths for justice?

Approached in this way, the Nicene Creed is not discarded but re-heard. Indigenous storytelling provides a healing hermeneutic by which the Creed's confession ("We believe...") is braided with local speech, memory, ritual, songs, and traditional dances. This allows the Creed to speak life in African contexts, where marginalised voices become primary guides for theological inclusion, pastoral renewal, and communal flourishing. Intergenerational care, memory, and wisdom flow between mothers and daughters, elders and youth, and the living-with-God², creating a theological praxis rooted in relationality and embodied faith.

² The phrase "the living-with-God" refers to those who have departed (ancestors) and now live in communion with God. Within African contexts, ancestors are not understood as absent or silenced, but as relationally present through memory, rituals, wisdom, and moral continuity within the community. This understanding

Grounded in indigenous storytelling, naming, and proverbs, this approach prepares the way for rereading the Nicene Creed in an African context, where the voices and experiences of the marginalised can be heard, valued, and woven into the life of theology.

Rereading the Nicene Creed in an African Context

Building on indigenous storytelling, naming, and proverbs, we can now revisit the Nicene Creed to hear and value perspectives historically silenced within its formulation. The Creed, formulated in 325 CE, is often presented as a universal statement of Christian faith. Yet, for many African theologians, its formulation without African voices, contexts, and epistemologies leaves an *inxeba elingaphakathi*—an invisible wound—within theology itself. This wound reflects not only historical exclusion but also the ongoing marginalisation of African perspectives in the global theological canon.

Naming this *inxeba elingaphakathi* is not merely descriptive; it is a theological and ethical act that restores dignity and authority to silenced voices. As Ob (2015) shows, African names encode relational, ethical, and spiritual realities, and naming the wound similarly situates marginalised experiences within the web of theological and communal accountability. Olojede (2014) demonstrates that storytelling, when coupled with naming, makes silenced experiences visible, giving them interpretive and ethical weight. Van Klinken (2018) emphasises that this naming is empowering, allowing those historically excluded to participate actively in theological reflection. Osei-Tutu (2022) further highlights that the relational and participatory act of naming restores meaning and integrates these voices into broader theological discourse. By explicitly naming the *inxeba elingaphakathi*, the Creed can be reread in ways that acknowledge, include, and give authority to the spiritual imagination, questions, and lived experiences of African believers, moving toward genuine theological healing.

Bediako (2000) reminds us that the Christian faith must be rooted in the cultural soil where it is lived; otherwise, it risks becoming alien to its adherents. Sanneh (2003) argues that the Gospel is inherently translatable, yet the Nicene formulation reflects a one-directional transmission from the Greco-Roman world, overlooking reciprocal theological conversation. Oduyoye (2001) describes this as the “silencing” of other epistemologies, where African women’s voices are absent in shaping orthodoxy. Bosch (1991) observes that mission and theology in the global South have often been shaped by imported frameworks, while Mbiti (1970) emphasises that African religio-cultural heritage offers indispensable insights into understanding God. These insights are largely absent in the Creed’s articulation, creating a theological dissonance for African believers who inhabit both biblical faith and African cosmology.

By revisiting the Nicene Creed through African lenses—acknowledging both its historical significance and its silences—we engage in a process of theological healing. This healing unfolds through naming the wounds, weaving together African and biblical insights, and restoring the dignity of voices long overlooked so that they may now shape the contours of theological reflection. As Behera (2024) reminds us, creeds must be continually reinterpreted in diverse cultural contexts if they are to avoid becoming instruments of exclusion and instead serve as decolonising tools for faith. This is not an

resonates with the Christian doctrine of the communion of saints while engaging African conceptions of intergenerational continuity beyond death.

erasure of the Creed but an expansion—allowing it to speak afresh within African contexts where spiritual imagination, languages, and lived questions give rise to a theology that embodies relationality, justice, and communal flourishing.

Healing the Wounds: Toward a Theologically Inclusive Future

Reclaiming African voices in relation to the Nicene Creed is both a historical correction and a theological imperative. Healing of *inxeba elingaphakathi*—the invisible wound—requires intentional practices that restore agency, affirm dignity, and cultivate inclusion. Engaging the Creed through African perspectives invites believers into a theology that resonates with lived realities, cultural expressions, and spiritual heritage. Chisale (2021) provides a concrete example of how ubuntu-informed practices can integrate marginalised voices—such as those of women with disabilities—into both communal and theological life, showing how historical exclusion continues to be addressed in contemporary contexts.

Affirming African Theological Agency

A theologically inclusive future begins with recognising African Christians as active interpreters of doctrine, capable of reading and embodying the Creed in ways that reflect communal wisdom, ethical reasoning, and culturally rooted meaning-making. This affirmation challenges historical hierarchies that positioned European theological voices as normative while marginalising African insights. It also empowers communities to reclaim theological agency, recognising that African contexts, experiences, and cosmologies are central to authentic faith expression (Chilisa 2012; Penxa-Matholeni 2022, 2024).

Integrating Indigenous Storytelling in Faith Formation

Indigenous storytelling serves as both a medium for healing and theological education. Storytelling is not merely narration but an embodied practice transmitting knowledge, ethical insight, and communal memory (Osei-Tutu 2022; Olojede 2014; Penxa-Matholeni 2022). Through oral traditions, ritual enactments, proverbs, and songs, communities engage with the Creed in dialogue with lived experience. These practices allow believers to name their wounds, situate personal and communal histories within a theological framework, and envision hope. By centering African narratives, storytelling ensures that theology is relational, embodied, and transformative rather than abstract or imposed.

Pastoral Care and Communal Healing

A rereading of the Creed grounded in African contexts enhances pastoral care by validating grief, suffering, and resilience while nurturing hope and solidarity. Pastoral practitioners can employ storytelling, ritual, and reflective practices to accompany widows, youth, and marginalised church members, creating spaces where experiences are recognised, heard, and integrated into communal life (Penxa-Matholeni 2022; Osei-Tutu 2022; Olojede 2014). These practices affirm that African Christians are theologians, capable of shaping faith in ways that honour their communities and spiritual heritage.

Towards an Inclusive Ecclesial Imagination

Healing the wounds of exclusion requires re-envisioning the church itself. Inclusion involves rethinking liturgy, catechesis, and preaching so that African epistemologies, languages, and cultural symbols are affirmed and celebrated. Theologically inclusive communities embody the Creed not merely as doctrinal text but as a living confession arising from the full diversity of God's people (Chilisa 2012; Osei-Tutu 2022; Penxa-Matholeni 2022). Through these practices, the church can nurture intergenerational wisdom, communal discernment, and spiritual flourishing, ensuring that African voices and questions are central to theological reflection.

By attending to the invisible wounds of history and embedding indigenous perspectives in theological reflection, African Christians reclaim ownership of their faith narratives. The Nicene Creed, read through this lens, becomes a site of remembrance and innovation—a tool for justice, healing, and faithful witness in a world where past exclusions can finally be addressed and transformed (Penxa-Matholeni 2022; Osei-Tutu 2022; Olojede 2014).

Conclusion: Remembering, Reclaiming, and Reimagining Faith

This paper traced the *inxeba elingaphakathi*—the invisible wound of Africa's exclusion from the Nicene Creed's theological imagination. By engaging the Creed through African epistemologies and pastoral theology, it revealed how historical erasure continues to shape faith and identity in Africa.

Through voices such as Hinga, Oduyoye, Osei-Tutu, Olojede, and Penxa-Matholeni, the study proposed rereading the Creed as a site of healing and inclusion. Integrating indigenous storytelling and communal wisdom reclaims African agency and repositions the Creed as a living confession grounded in African soil.

Reclaiming the Creed through *inxeba elingaphakathi* is thus an act of remembrance and restoration—a theological invitation to speak faith in African rhythms, languages, and symbols. In doing so, the Creed becomes not a marker of exclusion but a testimony to God's inclusive love that embraces all cultures and peoples.

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