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Molly Manyonganise

7 **Varungu Vatema (Black White People) in Post-colonial Zimbabwe**

Reframing Black Theology's Relevance in an African Context

Abstract

Historically, Black Theology was touted as a quest for freedom from racial oppression by black people. A reading of James Cone's conceptualisation of Black Theology reveals how colour becomes symbolic of either the oppressor or the oppressed. He depicts the colour black to represent the oppressed while whiteness takes the place of the oppressor. While James Cone's theology was intended to speak to the existential situation of people of colour in North America, the existence of Apartheid in some African countries such as South Africa made this theology also relevant in such contexts. African scholarship on liberation theologies and focusing on Black theology highlighted the usefulness of Black theology on the African continent in light of the adverse effects of colonialism. However, the attainment of independence by African countries raised questions whether it was still appropriate to be talking about Black theology on the continent. It would appear that most students of theology appear to think that the presence of black-led governments automatically led to the eradication of socio-economic as well as political structures of domination. In this chapter, I seek to interrogate the concept of "black white" people (*varungu vatema*) within the Zimbabwe context. The intention is to argue that those that assumed leadership from white colonial rule have failed to dismantle the colonial systems of domination. Instead, they have become black elites who are white to the core, hence, the poor's reference to them as *varungu* (white people). In such cases, the chapter focuses on how Black theology speaks to the existential struggles of poor black people who find themselves suffering at the hands of black rulers who claim to have freed them

from the white oppressor. This is largely a desk research which utilizes secondary sources.

Keywords: *Africa, Black Theology, Colonial, Colour, Independence, Oppressor, varungu vatema, Zimbabwe*

1. Introduction

Liberation Theology emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Boff and Boff note that the first theological reflections that were to lead to liberation theology had their origins in a context of dialogue between a church and a society in ferment, between Christian faith and the longings for transformation and liberation of the people (Boff & Boff, 1987, p. 2). The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) greatly influenced the emergence of liberation theology specifically in Latin America. From Boff and Boff’s analysis, the Council produced a theological atmosphere characterized by great freedom and creativity (Boff & Boff, 1987). The clergy in Latin America were frustrated after realizing that most people to whom they were preaching were living in abject poverty. Martin avers that it was no longer possible for the clergy to preach to such people while at the same time ignoring their needs for food, shelter, and human dignity (Martin, 2003). The clergy were particularly enraged by the existing gross inequalities and widening disparities among the people precisely in the Third World countries which they ascribed to the exploitative policies of the imperialist countries (Martin, 2003). The Second Vatican Council had encouraged the clergy to be involved in people’s struggle for justice, hence, followers of Christ could not be seen to be condoning injustice. Therefore, theologians needed to be immersed in the struggle for the transformation of society through the liberation of the oppressed (Martin, 2003). As key figures in Latin America such as Gustavo Gutierrez were having the consciousness of the need for a relevant theology that spoke to the existential realities in Latin America, black theologians in North America were also coming to realise that white theology in their context had failed to articulate their needs and experiences, so were also feminist theologians who began to challenge patriarchy in religious institutions. Therefore, liberation theology is a term that encompasses a number of theologies, namely, Latin American, black, African, feminist and womanist theologies. In this case, we talk of liberation

theologies in order to show that the focus of these theologies varies. While they all take liberation as the common concern, the source of oppression is perceived to be different though at times overlapping. However, Boesak rejects the forced distinctions created to separate all liberation theologies arising in North America, Latin America and Africa (Boesak, 1976). He argues that all these theologies are bound together by their concern for the liberation of the oppressed. This current chapter focuses on the relevance of Black Theology in contemporary Zimbabwe. It interrogates the concept *varungu vatema* (black-white people) within the socio-economic space of Zimbabwean society. The chapter argues that Zimbabwe's independence from racial oppression has failed to destroy colonial structures of domination. The metaphoric use of the term '*varungu*' (white people) denotes a society suffering from identity crises emanating from the emergence of a class resembling the former colonial masters. In such a context, the chapter argues that Black Theology remains relevant. In order to put this argument into its proper context, the article first provides an overview of Black Theology.

2. Black Theology: An Overview

Black Theology has a long history. Wilmore explains that the term "black theology" began to be used among a small group of black clergy in the United States during the second half of the 1960s (Wilmore, 1974, p. 211). For Wilmore this was a positive reaction among black church men to the secular black power movement and the black consciousness and cultural revitalization tendencies which accompanied it. In North America, Black theology is closely linked to James Cone. In fact, Joseph describes James Cone as the father of Black theology (Joseph, 2020). For Cone, Black theology represented the theological reflections of a radical black clergy who sought to interpret the meaning of God's liberating presence in a society where blacks were being economically exploited and politically marginalized because of their skin colour (Cone, 1984, p. 5). He, therefore, locates the origin of Black theology in three contexts, namely (i) the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s largely associated with Martin Luther King Junior; (ii) the publication of Joseph Washington's *Black Religion*;

and (iii) the rise of the black power movement strongly influenced by Malcolm's philosophy of black nationalism. This theology emerged, therefore, as the black clergy was compelled by the urgency of the time to make theological sense out of the struggle for black freedom (Cone, 1984, p. 24). For Cone, to advocate a Black theology meant that the black clergy wanted the whole world to know that it was searching for a radically new theological starting point that would clearly distinguish its perspective from the alternatives provided by whites and adopted by conservative blacks (Cone, 1984, p. 24). Hence, the term "Black theology" was invented at the end of the 1960s in the context of the National Congress of Black Churches (NCBC) theological commission as the theological counterpart to black power. For Cone, the phrase "Black theology" came into being as members of the black clergy "searched for a theological basis upon which to stand." (Cone, 1984, p. 20) He further argues that the term was created in response to black power at a time when the credibility of the Christian faith was being severely tested in the black ghettos of the church. Hence, he reveals that his first publication, *Black Theology and Black Power*, was a manifesto against whiteness and for blackness in an attempt to liberate Christians from white supremacy (Cone, 2018). Hopkins argues that in this publication Cone views the heart of the Christian message as liberation of the poor, who struggled against concrete structures preventing them from attaining their full humanity (Hopkins, 2012, p. 15). As such, Cone regarded the black power movement as the actual Gospel of Jesus Christ. Hopkins and Antonio argue that Black theology originated within a specific history constituted by peculiar cultural and political contexts confronted by definite social and spiritual challenges (Hopkins & Antonio, 2012). For example, all black theologians agreed that blacks had the right to self-identity – for instance, name change, African culture, linguistic style, slave tradition, racial lineage, and the right to self-determination, that is, controlling their political destiny and physical communities (Hopkins, 2012, 12).

Following from the above, liberation is at the centre of Black Theology. Hence, Hopkins avers that in the 1960s and 1970s, Black Theology centred the concept of liberation within religious and theological dialogue (Hopkins, 2012, p. 12). In his publication, *A Black theology of Liberation*,

James Cone argues that the theme of liberation is at the centre of Christian Theology. Cone accuses American white theology of not considering the struggles of blacks in America, and hence, paid no attention to the need for black liberation. Hence, for him

“The task of Christian theology is to analyse the meaning of hope in God in such a way that the oppressed community of a given society will risk all for earthly freedom, a freedom possible by the resurrection of Jesus. The language of theology challenges societal structures because it is inseparable from the suffering community.” (Cone, 2010, p. 4).

When white theologians accused Cone’s Black Theology of being reverse racism, he rebutted their argument. He argued that theology can never be neutral and fail to take sides in the face of oppression. For him, the language of theology must be one of liberation proclaiming the end of bondage and interpreting the religious dimensions of revolutionary struggle. He further argues that in a revolutionary situation, there can never be non-partisan theology. In fact, theology has to always be identified with a particular community either that of the oppressor or that of the oppressed (Hopkins, 2012). In this case, for Cone, a theology of the victims is authentic Christian theology while that of the oppressor is a theology of the anti-Christ. He argues,

“black theology is authentic Christian theology because it identifies with the oppressed black community while American white theology is a theology of the anti-Christ because it identifies with the white communities which means it projects God as approving white oppression of black existence.” (Cone, 2010).

For Cone, by defining the problems of Christianity in isolation from the black condition, white theology becomes a theology of white oppressors, serving as a divine sanction for criminal acts committed against blacks (Cone, 2010, p. 9). Hence, the blindness of white theology to the struggles of blacks, therefore, justifies the emergence of Black Theology in America. Cone argues

“The appearance of Black theology on the American scene...is primarily to the failure of white religionists to relate the gospel of Jesus to the pain of being black in a white racist society. It arises from the need of blacks to liberate themselves from white oppressors. Black theology is a theology of liberation which arises from an identification with the oppressed blacks of

America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Jesus in the light of the black condition. It believes that the liberation of the black community is God's liberation." (Cone, 2010, p. 5).

Hence, Black theology has a specific task of analysing the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in light of oppressed blacks so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, and as bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression. Hence, Black Theology is a theology of and for the black community seeking to interpret the religious dimensions of the forces of liberation in that community. In his publication, *For My People: Black theology and the Black Church* (Cone, 1984), Cone sought to set boundaries of the audience for which he was writing. Hence, he sought to close his ears to the criticisms levelled against him by white theologians. For him, they were not his audience after all. Cone explains the aim of Black Theology as that of interpreting God's activity as related to the oppressed black community. Hence, Black theology is Christian Theology because "there can be no theology of the gospel which does not arise from an oppressed community" (Cone, 2010, p. 5). For him, God is revealed in Jesus as a God whose righteousness is inseparable from the weak and helpless in human society. In the Old Testament, God took the side of the oppressed; he did not maintain neutrality. He argues,

"[T]he God of the biblical tradition is not uninvolved or neutral regarding human affairs; God is decidedly involved. God is active in human history, taking sides with the oppressed of the land. If God is not involved in human history, then all theology is useless, and Christianity itself is a mockery, a hollow, meaningless diversion." (Cone, 2010, p. 6).

He traces the liberation motif from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Using the Exodus event and Jesus' proclamation in Luke 4, he emphasizes that God is always concerned about the oppressed groups in society. Codorette, Giblin and Legge aver that Cone provided the Christian community with a powerful service by pointing to the suffering and oppression of minority people in developed countries and the dismal record of the Christian churches in confronting the racism in their midst (Codorette, Giblin & Legge, 1992, p. 6).

Cone in his publications obsesses with the symbolism of the colours, white and black. He argues that whiteness is the symbol of the anti-Christ.

In his opinion, it characterizes the activity of crazy individuals fascinated by their own image of themselves, and thus unable to see that they are what is wrong with the world. On the other hand, blackness represents all victims of oppression who realise that the survival of their humanity is bound up with liberation from whiteness. Hence, Black theology seeks to analyse the satanic nature of whiteness and by doing so to prepare all non-whites for revolutionary action. In a radical demand, Cone charges that if white theology desires to be Christian theology, it has to cease to be white theology and become Black Theology by denying whiteness and affirming blackness as God's intention for humanity. Cone's theorization of Black Theology found resonance with the experiences of South Africans under Apartheid. As such, it influenced the emergence of Black Theology in South Africa. The next section focuses on Black Theology in Africa paying particular attention to South Africa where the theology became prominent.

2.1 Black Theology in South Africa: A Reflective Analysis

Maluleke traces the origins of Black Theology on the African continent to Kimpa Vita who was the first to declare that Jesus was black (Maluleke, 2022). However, it is Cone's theology that influenced South African black theologians. Cone's ideas became useful to African black theologians especially those in South Africa who were confronted with the evils of Apartheid (Codorette, Giblin & Legge, 1992, p. 6). South African Black Theology takes after American Black Theology, and it aims at relating the gospel message to the social situation of segregation and oppression in which the blacks in South Africa find themselves (Ukpong, 1984). Hence, in South Africa, Black Theology emerged in response to structural white racism in the Christian communities and lack of cultural and economic power in the black community combined with a new youth movement (Hopkins, 2012, 15). For Hopkins, the South African Black theology was a direct offspring of its own black consciousness movement headed by Steve Biko (Hopkins, 2012). Hence, in 1970, the South African Christian Movement established the Black Theology Movement Project. Masenya avers that Black theology in South Africa challenged white men's biased interpretations of the Christian Bible. Black Theology in South Africa was, therefore, embedded in the desire to champion liberation at the national

level (Masenya, 1995, p. 150). Van Arde argues that Black Theology in South Africa emerged in a context of the liberation struggle, hence, it is synonymous with the Apartheid struggle (Van Arde, 2016).

Key figures in South African Black theology are Steve Biko, Allan Boesak and David Moore. Steve Biko headed the black consciousness movement against Apartheid. Biko's movement provided avenues that influenced black theological reflection and praxis in relation to the fundamental questions of integrity and authenticity in global struggles for freedom, equity, and dignity (Boesak, 2020, 201). Boesak shows how Black theology in South Africa was greatly influenced by both North American Black Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology (Boesak, 1976). He borrows a lot from Cone and Gutierrez's understanding of what Christianity means to the oppressed. He, therefore, argues that

“Black theology is a situational theology. It is the black people's attempt to come to terms theologically with their black situation. It seeks to interpret the gospel in such a way that the situation of blacks will begin to make sense. It seeks to take seriously the biblical emphasis in the wholeness of life, which has always had its counterpart in the African heritage, trying to transform the departmentalized theology blacks have inherited from the Western world into a biblical, holistic theology. It is part of the black struggle toward liberation from religious, economic, psychological and cultural dependency.” (Boesak, 1976, p. 13).

Just like Cone, Boesak views the Exodus event as well as Jesus' proclamation of liberation to the oppressed in Luke 4 as the cornerstones of Black theology with the South African context. Jesus is the liberator of the oppressed, hence, for Boesak, Black theology is Christological theology because Christ is its centre. Kobo puts the development of Black theology in South Africa into two phases (Kobo, 2018, p. 46). The first phase is the phase of Biko, Boesak and Moore and focused on racism as the cause of the socio-political situation in South Africa in 1970s. The second phase is that of Mosala, Maimela among others who shifted their focus from racism to classism as the chief problem of the socio-political challenges in South Africa. The failure by Black theology to factor in gender oppression received a negative critique from feminist and womanist theologians. However, Kobo notes that the use of Marxist class analysis in the second

phase brought to the fore women's struggles (Kobo, 2018). Such an analysis is crucial as it centres women's struggles in the discourse of liberation theologies.

2.2 A Feminist/Womanist Critique of Black Theology

Scholarship focusing on gender and theology have critiqued Black Theology for its gender blindness. Cone accepts that his overlooking the problem of sexism in the black community and society as a whole was a failure on his part. He explains

“I have become so embarrassed by that failure that I could not reissue this volume (1986) without making a note of it and without changing the exclusive language of the 1970 edition to inclusive language. I know that this is hardly enough to rectify my failure [...] simply by changing words. But it is an important symbol of what we must do, because our language is a reflection of the reality we create. Sexism dehumanizes and kills, and it must be fought on every front.” (Cone, 2010, p. xx).

He, therefore, called on male black theologians not to be dismissive of the existence of sexism and the need to confront it within their theology. In South Africa, Masenya notes that black male theologians failed to advance black women's interests (Maenya, 1995, p. 150). Womanist theologians in particular have challenged Black Theology's presentation of God and Jesus as male. Hence, Grant (Grant, 1989) and Cleveland (Cleveland, 2022) argue that Christ is a black woman, and that God is a black woman respectively. From Watters' perspective, “the black male Christ encompasses a single-dimensional understanding of the social oppression of racism, but fails to acknowledge the multi-dimensional oppression experienced by [black women]” (Watters, 2019, 93). In her analysis, Black Theology failed to understand that black women suffer from racism, sexism, and classism. In this case, if Black Theology is to speak to women's experiences, it has to acknowledge this reality.

In the next section, I provide a synopsis of the struggles that Zimbabweans have had to contend with in a post-colonial state. I should hasten to indicate that such struggles are not unique to Zimbabwe but run through most, if not all post-colonial African states. These struggles relate to the economic, political, cultural among many other struggles.

3. Post-colonial Zimbabwe: From Struggles against Racism to Class Struggles

Zimbabwe got its independence from British colonial rule in 1980 after a protracted war of liberation against racism. However, independence in Zimbabwe saw the advent of a new class of black elites resembling the erstwhile colonizer. Scholars on Zimbabwean history have shown how the country's transition from colonial to black rule was a failed one (Mandaza, 1986; Bond & Manyanya, 2003; Zamponi, 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009; Muzondidya, 2011). Ndlovu-Gatsheni views Zimbabwe's transitions as always fragile and unstable (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009). In his analysis, the defeat of the colonial white elite did not result in a stable and democratic transition in 1980. If anything, it opened floodgates to violent inter and intra-black elite struggles for power. As a result, the African political elite failed to dismantle the colonial structures of oppression and marginalization, but quickly became comfortable within it. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that Zimbabwe was born as a successor to the Rhodesian state rather than as a new alternative (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009, p. 302). This largely alienated the majority of Zimbabweans from engaging actively in the process of state formation. Like the colonial master, the black elite in Zimbabwe is bent to show the difference between them and the poor. The otherisation of the poor is so visible. At the dawn of independence, the politically connected, and the rich were able to shift physical spaces from high-density suburbs to middle and low-density suburbs. Zimbabwe's post-colonial education also produced individuals who became successful professionals and business people in their own right. In most cases, this was a new bourgeoisie closely associated with the ruling party (ZANU PF). They too assumed the behavior of the whites. As the black elite, they employ poor blacks from the rural and/or high-density areas as house cleaners and garden boys. In order to entrench the notion of servant, they require these workers to wear uniforms in the same way they were required in the colonial era.

During Zimbabwe's first decade of self-rule, the Lancaster House Agreement acted as the supreme law. It entrenched the property rights of the white minority specifically in agriculture thereby impeding the significant changes in the distribution of economic resources (Zamponi, 2005, p. 32).

In 1998, Emmanuel Chiwome, in *Masango Mavi* expressed his pessimism in the postcolonial state's ability to deal with challenges being faced by the citizens. Through the short stories in the literary text, Chiwome projects his doubts in the ability of the state to fulfil promises made during the struggle of independence particularly the failure to resolve the land question. However, it is interesting to note that even after Zimbabwe embarked on land distribution from the year 2000, the process was merely a survival strategy for the ruling elite and was not premised on the need for the poor to access land. While arguments have been proffered that a few white elites had large tracts of land in their possession, the ruling elite in Zimbabwe has amassed several farms each at the expense of the poor majority. Hence, the poor have been condemned to perpetual servitude as some of them seek employment in the black-owned farms. What is clear is that the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) produced a new breed of black farmers, which treats its farm workers in more brutal ways than the white farmers. Stories of how farm workers go for months without pay and food are always in the Zimbabwean media. Some of the media stories are: *Zimbabwe: The plight of ex-commercial farm workers* (Relief Web, 2004), *Farm workers disenfranchised* (Institute of war and peace, 2008) and *Zimbabwe: Plight of farm workers under Black employers worse-Union* (Tapfumaneyi, 2019). The general sentiment throughout the years has been that the new farm owners are engaging in unfair labour practices. They remain unchallengeable because of their close proximity to political power. The FTLRP ignored the former farm workers and it created a new class of citizens which stayed as squatters in their own country. Sachikonye, therefore, questions how the FTLRP could reduce poverty when it was causing another section of Zimbabwean society to live in squalid conditions (Sachikonye, 2003).

Furthermore, the scourge of corruption has benefitted the politically connected and powerful at the expense of the generality of Zimbabweans. This has widened the gap between the rich and the poor. Beckman makes a critical analysis of post-colonial states (Beckman, 1988). As alluded to earlier, he observed a rapid growth of a domestic ruling class which has its roots in precolonial ruling classes. In his analysis, colonial export economies had prepared the groundwork by producing commercial and professional classes that were in the forefront of the nationalist movement.

Hence, independence created opportunities for rapid advance for such groups as well as for a fast-rising class of senior bureaucrats, army officers and managers within the state sector. As a result, there emerged a ruling class that distinguishes itself from the rest of the population in terms of its own material conditions and the amount of control it exercises over the allocation of resources (Beckman, 1988, 30). In such a scenario, the poor Zimbabweans have begun to view the rich as ‘*varungu*’ (white people). This allusion is riddled with connotations of how they behave as well as how well-off they are. For example, they can afford to employ and pay salaries to their staff. Furthermore, they have managed to maintain or surpass the standards of living set by the whites. They live a totally different lifestyle when compared to the poor and vulnerable classes. Hence, they possess ‘*hurungu*’ (whiteness) in their own right. In this case, the poor always refer to them as ‘*varungu vedu*’ (our white people). At times, the metaphor has been used to denote professional employers. It is, therefore, clear that though metaphoric, we still have white people in black skins. When used loosely, it refers to anyone who is able to pay for a service. Hence, it is common in commuter omnibuses to hear conductors referring to passengers as *varungu*.

The above discussion shows that Zimbabwe is a stratified society. The post-colonial state has enriched a few black elites. Otu notes the existence of various classes in Zimbabwe (Otu, 2010). In his analysis, there is a local bourgeoisie comprising the local white bourgeoisie and the local black bourgeoisie. The latter forms the bulk of the ruling class in Zimbabwe. Below them lies the working class, which is made up mostly of urban residents, working in both the public and privately owned industries. This is inclusive of civil servants and workers working in the manufacturing and service industries. The peasantry forms the lowest class in this stratified society which Makamure said cannot be wished away (Makamure, 1987). The way society is stratified in Zimbabwe is also visible within the New Pentecostal Movements (NPMs) where partnership in these movements is determined by how well-off one is. Within a context of socio-economic challenges, Zimbabwe witnessed the emergence of a parasitic movement that uses religion to “steal” from the most vulnerable of society. In the name of “giving to be blessed”, the movement has produced flamboyant church leaders who live in plenty while members of their churches wallow

in poverty. Instead of the state regulating the activities of such churches, the political leaders actually visit these churches for political gain. What then is the relevance of Black theology in contemporary Zimbabwe?

4. The Relevance of Black Theology in Contemporary Zimbabwe

In the same way that Cone saw Black theology as indispensable in the 20th century (Cone, 2010, p. 5), I argue that considering the class struggles prevalent in African societies makes this theology even more relevant in the 21st century. Cone explains some of the weaknesses of his Black theology (Cone, 2010). He accepts that he failed to incorporate a global analysis of oppression into *A Black theology of Liberation*. The absence of a clearly focused economic, class analysis weakened his overall analysis. He accepts that the problem of the human condition involved much more than just the issue of racism. He argues that “an exclusive focus of racial injustice without a comprehensive analysis of its links with corporate capitalism greatly distorts the multidimensional character of oppression and also camouflages the true nature of modern racism” (Cone, 2010, xxii). In his analysis, without class analysis, a global understanding of oppression will be distorted and its domestic manifestations seriously misrepresented. This speaks directly to the Zimbabwean context where obsession with one’s skin colour would distort the experiences of the downtrodden blacks by elite black folks. Before I focus on this, I wish to examine arguments about the relevance of Black theology in the contemporary South African context.

After the demise of Apartheid, the question asked was whether Black theology remained relevant. Many held that with the end of Apartheid together with the democratization of the country renders Black theology irrelevant (Solomons & Klassens, 2019). The argument has been that the dawn of democracy is a significant variable for those seeking to replace liberation with metaphors deemed more suitable for South Africa’s current context. South African Black theologians have battled with questions of whether the relevance of Black theology can be sustained beyond Apartheid. Concerns have been raised on how as a theology; it has now been confined within academic walls with no trace of a movement of resistance

within communities. The challenge with South African Black theology like its North American counterpart has been its obsession with race at the expense of other forms of oppression. It neglected to challenge the hidden connections between racism and oppression related to class, gender, and religion among others. Hence, South Africa like any other African country has gained political independence but devoid of economic independence. Like Zimbabwe, there also has arisen within it a parasitic and corrupt ruling black elite. The greatest challenge with Black theology in Africa is that it was never prepared to resist black rulers. It wrongly assumed that once white colonial rule has been defeated, its work was over. It did not envisage or create possibilities of itself taking part in the reconstruction of postcolonial African states. Its silence on the abuse of office by both political and religious leaders in Africa has given birth to varied perceptions on its relevance on the African continent as a whole.

At the root of such perceptions on its redundancy is the relevance of liberation as the focus of Black theology. Chimhanda asks a pertinent question (Chimhanda, 2010): Is the liberation agenda of Black theology in Africa complete? In trying to answer this question, I will refer to my experience in the Zimbabwean academy. In 2014, during one of my lectures in the African Theology course, one student asked whether Black theology was still relevant on the African continent considering that the continent had now been freed from racial oppression. This is a question which I had pondered over for quite a long time. I had wondered whether Black theology had become redundant. I then thought that with the prevalence of class struggles in post-independent Zimbabwe in particular, Black theology needed to speak to its existence. The question that arises, therefore, is how black Christ should be so that His word rebukes 'black white' people oppressing black-black people. I use the double barrels intentionally. I assume that the usage of '*murungu*' (white) denotes that class erases skin colour or dilutes it to resemble our yester-year colonizer while poverty darkens one's black skin to the extent that there is an observable difference between the rich and the poor though at face value, they are both black. Hence, West argues that reconciliation with God does not mean that one's skin is physically black (West, 1999, p. 17). For him, basically, it depends on the colour of one's heart, soul and mind. In his analysis, it is possible for people with black skins to have lily white hearts. In this case, one's

heart defines their identity, that is, whether they choose to identify with the oppressed or the oppressor. As such, concepts such as black power may still be useful in dealing with black-to-black oppression and dispossession.

Within the Zimbabwean context, the ecumenical movement has historically dealt with the state in a way that fits within the Black theology paradigm without necessarily naming it that way. For example, during colonial times, white missionaries challenged the government on the way it was treating blacks. For instance, after the promulgation of the Land Apportionment Act (1930), the Native Husbandry Act (1951) and the Land Tenure Act (1969), Bishop Ralph Dodge of the United Methodist Church warned Ian Smith, the then Prime Minister of Rhodesia to improve the way the government was treating blacks and also to ensure that they were accorded enough space or political participation, which would then lead to their contributing to decision-making or else their continued sidelining would result in them rising up against the regime. Banana views Bishop Dodge as “an unwavering crusader of social change in Rhodesia” (Banana, 1996, 135). Another notable missionary is Bishop Donal Lamont of the Roman Catholic Church. Through various pastoral letters, Bishop Lamont castigated the government for the way it was treating blacks. For example, in 1959, he penned a pastoral letter entitled “*Purchased people*” in which he criticised the racial policies of government (Verstraelen, 1998, p. 52). The major observations of the men of the cloth were that it was not prudent for the colonial government to monopolise power, responsibility and decision-making. Their criticism led Bishops Dodge and Lamont to be deported from Zimbabwe in 1964 and 1977 respectively. In post-colonial Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the Zimbabwe Catholics Bishops Conference (ZCBC), and the Evangelical Fellowship in Zimbabwe (EFZ) started to criticize that government after realizing that the benefits of independence were being enjoyed by a few black elites. In 2006, they released a pastoral letter titled “*A Call to Conscience*” and the “*Zimbabwe We Want*” document while the ZCBC, in 2007 published a pastoral letter titled “*God Hears the Cry of the Oppressed*”. Both letters were a vicious rebuke to the ruling elite that was devoid of conscience and had mastered the skill of oppressing the vulnerable in Zimbabwe. Another pastoral letter that made the political establishment uncomfortable was

released by the ZCBC in August 2020 and was titled “The March is not Ended”. Scholars of religion in Zimbabwe have engaged with these letters in order to show how the church in Zimbabwe continues to speak truth to power as well as raising the consciousness of Zimbabweans to the fact that freedom is their right (Chitando, 2013; Tarusarira, 2016; Manyonganise, 2013, 2020, 2022). The church in this case has framed itself as the voice of the voiceless.

However, despite all these engagements between the church and the state, the state has been unrelenting in the way that it treats the vulnerable in society. Hence, like Cone, I ask the question as to whether we still have enough intellectual, political, and cultural resources in Africa to fully undermine the vicious legacy of white supremacy. The persistent reference to whiteness could be evidence that while we loath it on one hand, we envy it on the other or maybe we have come to terms with the fact that colonial legacies are here (in Africa) to stay. If then Black Theology is to be relevant in contemporary African societies in general and Zimbabwe in particular, it needs to reinvent its tools of analysis and define its role in the reconstruction process of postcolonial African societies. It has to find the courage to resist oppression and dehumanization of the poor by their black brothers and sisters. As it stands, Zimbabwe needs a radical theology such as Black theology to call to order African authoritarian rulers who are exploiting African resources for their personal benefit while the majority of people in their countries suffer. A social analysis of the reasons why post-colonial Zimbabwean society is structured the way it is socially, economically, and politically is crucial for today’s Black Theology. It needs to journey with the poor in postcolonial African societies in their struggles of oppression, dehumanization and marginalization by black ruling elites and their petty bourgeoisie counterparts. In the midst of authoritarian regimes silencing the poor who are simply crying out for survival, Black Theology needs to provide voice and hope to the poor. Black Theology needs to recreate itself into a formidable movement of resistance, this time against ‘black white’ oppressors. It is they who have sold out the struggle for the total liberation of black people, hence, Black theology should call them to order and to account for such betrayal of trust. Kee

calls on Black Theology to confront white capitalism in America, corruption and unjustified wars in Africa for it to be relevant to the poor in both continents (Kee, 2006).

5. Conclusion

The intention of this article was to argue for the relevance of Black Theology in contemporary Zimbabwe in view of the existent class struggles many years after independence from colonial rule. In doing this, the study interrogated the usage of the term “*varungu vatema*” (black white people) in reference to the black ruling elite or those with capacity to pay for services. The article highlighted that the persistence of such colour symbolisms indicate the failure by liberation movements to dismantle the structures of power built by colonial governments. In such cases, the article argued that the black political elite and the emergent black bourgeoisie simply replaced colonial rulers but continued to operate within the same oppressive power structures. As a result, the poor majority in Zimbabwe have been alienated from the state as well as the parasitic and corrupt church leaders, particularly of NPMs. What this means is that the evil that Black theology spoke against during colonialism is alive and well in post-colonial Zimbabwe as in other African countries, South Africa included. It is, therefore, evident that Black Theology remains relevant to radically rebuke the black-black oppression and dehumanization. The chapter, however, pointed to the need for Black theology to carve and reinvent itself so that it becomes effective in the postcolonial reconstruction of African societies.

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