

AFRICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY: ITS ROLES TOWARDS ACHIEVING AUTHENTIC AFRICAN LIFE

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Abstract

Africans and African theologians are faced with many conflicting world views and bad conditions of life in general which range from racial segregation, political instability, religious and ethnic clashes, lack of harmony with African religion and Christian religion, Modern culture (globalization), socio-economic exploitation, oppression of Africans by their colonial masters and oppression of Africans by Africans themselves, in the course of living out their authentic life as an African people. To achieve a better and sustainable way of living in this age of globalized world, there is a need to employ the principles or the tenets of African liberation theology, to minimize the sources of tension from the emerging issues emanating from conflicting world views and bad conditions of life. These salient or emerging issues confronting living authentic African life will be managed or enhanced properly with the tenets of African liberation theology. African liberation theology and its tools are employed here to redirect the life of Africans and their social, economic, and political well-being for better living and purposeful life. This write-up draws up data, heavily from the experience of African people within and outside African societies. This shows that African people are treated in an exploitative manner both as individuals and as countries all over the world in many areas of life hence the emergence of African liberation theology.

Keywords: Liberation, Theology, Social, Political, African

Introduction

The African continent has suffered and has been marginalized greatly for years and even today by their colonial masters and through some activities of the missionary enterprise though not intentionally intended by the missionaries themselves. Within these years of suffering and oppression which is still going on in different forms, their lives kept changing from one degradation to another. The economic activities, political, social, human

interactions, culture, and religion changed from their originality to forced modern life or put bluntly to march the way of life of their colonial masters without checking or evaluating their life situations or world views. Africans are always under pressure to assimilate the culture of other continents of the world while other continents assimilate new cultures willingly. Though, some changes or transformations were for better living while some came as a result of racism, oppression, and domination. The African continent was seen by colonial masters as a virgin land to be exploited hence the sharing of African nations by the world powers occurred in the Berlin conference without involving the Africans themselves. The world powers never considered Africa to be in the same class as them because of racism. Ojukwu (1969) during the struggle for Biafran freedom cried out that:

I have for a long time thought about this predicament- the attitude of the civilized world to this conflict. The more I think about it the more I am convinced that our disability is racial. The root cause of our problem lies in the fact that we are black. If all the things that have happened to us had happened to other people who are not black, if other people who are not black had reacted in the way our people have reacted these two long years, the world's response would surely have been different. (p. 5).

The above explanation or insight given by Ojukwu explains, on the contrary, the urgent attention being given to Ukraine due to the invasion by Russian country, but this urgency to stop the war and supplying of international aid cannot happen or take place when any of the African countries are involved in any invasion or genocide whether from within or from outside of the African countries, rather fueling of the crisis will be in their mind in a shrew way so that the world powers will be supplying arms and ammunition to the detriment of the developing countries. Again, the above statement shows how Africans are treated in the issues concerning their development physically, economically, socially, and culturally. African liberation theology therefore was born out of pity or it came as a movement or struggle to liberate Africans from all sorts of oppression found among them and from outside of African continents, be it from political, social, racial, or economic oppression and so on. The African liberation theology as proposed by some scholars aims or struggles for total and vehement rejection of all sorts of evils that wreck, or ruin the authentic existence and life of African nations and the revival of African heritage in all forms.

The African liberation theology in the course of history was seen as a kind of movement that metamorphosed into African nationalism, Pan-Africanism, the Negritude movement, and African personality, designed to ensure the full realization of authentic African existence in their march to self-determination. This is important to be noted, judging from the attitude or treatment of the European world since the 15th century toward Africans in terms of exploitation, racism, and their economic policies which were geared to under-develop Africa, this affected and oppressed the fundamental human rights of the African continents even till today, hence the need for African revival. For the Europeans started with the transportation of millions of Africans using them as slaves for different purposes.

They justified this slave trade with reference to biblical passages violently applied out of context. When the depopulation of Africa became no longer profitable due to sanctions from other world powers, they started to exploit the natural resources of the African continents.

To continue with this exploitation, they hoisted or install puppet African administrations to create the illusion of political independence, while retaining the control of the government and the economy of the African continent. This of course bred many consequences seen in the African continents today which led to political instability, cultural degradation, epileptic power supply, epileptic economic growth, and unending killings going on in different countries of Africa, in the African land in the name of religious and ethnic clashes. This is what Rodney (2009) described as the perpetual developing of the African continent. While some argued that the African continent will perpetually remain the world's underdogs in everything since they are still in the bondage of the social, political, and economic growth of their oppressors.

The above situation in the African continent has generated many kinds of conditions which have caused ripple effects on the mentality or worldview of Africans. This made the Africans reduce all their problems to the point of view of religious factor which is to say that any bad condition is caused by the devil or have the devil's manipulations. These of course gradually snowballed into a growing number of churches in African continents daily. This again revitalized the worship of African Traditional Religion by the youths who believes that it will help to solve their economic hardship because the Gods have been abandoned and they want to return. Going further, its effects like in Nigeria have bred many issues like banditry, unknown gunmen, herdsmen, bandits, terrorist attacks, ritual killings, trafficking, and organ harvesting. This in turn accounts for the excessive brain drain taking its toll on African nations to another part of the world, either for safety or for economic growth (Nnoruga and Osigwe, 2023). African liberation theology tends to restore the natural and human capital development of Africans through its principles. This is part of the struggle that was fought by most African nationalists so that the African continent will not be swept down or away by the stronger governments and other continents of the world.

Towards the Origin of African Liberation Theology: An Overview

Liberation theology is a theology that originated from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the wretched, and the voiceless of the world. For Umeh (2017),

It is a theology that recognizes the social aspect of the gospel and the need for social actions in the alleviation of human suffering. It is equally a theology that takes seriously the political dimension of the Christian faith, which... can be understood in the world of the poor. The world of the poor ...is the key to understanding the Christian faith, to understanding the activity of the church and the political dimension of that faith and that ecclesial activity. (p. 87).

This means that liberation theology is a guidance and reflection of Christianity that is identifiable with those who suffer, that represents freedom of transformation. As already hinted earlier, liberation theology is a situational theology that can originate anywhere but, historically it originated in Latin America. As a historical theology, Umeh argued that it is rooted in the practical faith of the believing community to transform the world with the liberating message of the gospel. It calls for authentic solidarity with the poor by analyzing with them the reasons or causes of their poverty and suffering. From all these explanations, it can be understood that the interest of liberation theology is to let the Gospel shine on earthly realities so that human beings, especially the poor, may be liberated from poverty and miserable life.

The biblical foundation of liberation theology can be ascertained from the actions of Jesus Christ both from the Old Testament and the New Testament. Liberation theology entails any action in favour of the poor as a practical expression of Christian love. Umeh (2017) expressed the biblical foundation thus:

In the Bible, God is presented as upright and just. He is presented as God interested in the well-being of all especially the poor (cf., Ps 94, Deut 10;18; 24: 14-18; Ex 22: 21-24; Si 35: 12-19). God reveals himself in the Old Testament as the liberator of the oppressed and the defender of the poor, demanding from man faith in him and justice towards man's neighbour. It is only in the observance of the duties of justice that God is truly recognized as the liberator of the oppressed....Almost all the prophets of the Old Testament from Hosea to Malachi stood for the just treatment of the poor, the weak, and the disadvantaged members of society. In the New Testament, the dignity of the poor and the entire human person is practically expressed in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ....The essence of Incarnation, God's self-manifestation in the world, is to save the entire human race from powers of darkness and sin...He is the fulfilment of the prophecy to the Israelis: the spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord (Luke 4, 18). (pp. 94-95).

As stated earlier, there are many trends or strands in African theology which keep emanating as history or events as time goes on. As of now, there are many currents in the theology of liberation in Africa which include: - African liberation theology, African women's liberation, African cultural liberation, South African Black theology, and a host of others. It is in this sense that one can add or say Biafran liberation theology that is using the instrument of theology as a module to solve the problems of the Biafran agitations. For liberation theology according to Oborji (2005):

...seeks through the gospel, to address the oppressive elements in a traditional culture, and focus on the political and economic situation of the particular cultural context to liberate the people from the forces of sin and death, reinforce their

identity, and give a new orientation to their advancement....The theology of liberation in Africa therefore, in its various expressions, arises out of the concern of the theologians to address the people's experience of exploitation, oppression, and injustice. (p. 155).

Since the emergence of liberation theology and other currents in theology, Cone (1979) and most scholars have been asking what has the gospel message to do with the oppressed Blacks or Africans in their struggle for liberation. Most scholars especially European scholars did not conceive nor do they assume that meaningful dialogue can come from black people or oppressed people of the world in the search for a contemporary understanding of the gospel message. Unfortunately, Oguejiofor (1996) queued into the same thought pattern as thus:

That African Traditional Religion cannot play the role philosophy naturally plays in the elaboration of theology. Moreover, most of what we have today in the studies on African Traditional Religion hardly goes beyond phenomenological studies and is not yet critical enough to provide the basis for speculative theology. Hence, like African Christian theology itself, many theories are left untested, uncriticized, and reflected. Furthermore, studies in African Traditional Religion are yet to reach the level of showing how this religion still influences the life of Africans. (p. 26).

This shows that most of the new theological ideas came from the Europeans and Africans, though more from Europeans with a racial undertone. This explains again that the experiences of the people must be evaluated or looked into which most scholars did not put into consideration, hence before any liberation can take place and be worth fighting for, or be denounced as seen above, their experiences from all forms must be considered and taken into account and these experiences differ greatly from one continent of the world to another. The experiences of the Black Americans among the whites are different from the experiences of the Blacks in South Africa and Africans in general differ from each other. But at the foundation of it, all is the use of the Gospel message as a tool for liberation, just like the people of Israelites were liberated from the land of Egypt by God. The contents of liberation must come from the oppressed, which must be understood by the people liberating the oppressed in line with the gospel message. Hence, Oguejiofor (1996) confirmed that "theology that can be a response to the African's yearning for God, for salvation, should be embedded in his culture, and also rise above that culture" (p. 25).

In the course of liberating Africans through history, to become independent and authentic nations, Africans struggled from time to time as a group of Africans coming together in and outside of the shores of Africa, and as African continent coming together again to liberate the African continent. This struggle went through processes or stages undertaken by the African people themselves. According to Han (2013),

During the period of agitation for independence, early African intellectuals were concerned not only with political matters but also with the promotion of the African

cultural-religious heritage. Although the main goal was to regain political self-control in Africa, cultural liberation was not excluded. African intellectuals and nationalists recognized that there would not be genuine political liberation without cultural liberation. The negation of African culture, to the African people, meant to deprive African people of their very identity; the revitalization of African culture meant to recover African identity. (pp. 23-24).

The struggle for self-affirmation and independence by Africans became a matter of priority among African intellectuals. This liberation of the African continent from the destructive influences and bondages of Western colonization touched all faces of African life. The above struggle in Africa to gain independence in political and cultural life gave rise to major categories of movements:- Pan-Africanism and African nationalism, and the Negritude movement and African personality. Pan Africanism according to Legun (1966) is the expression of a desire for African unity among the Africans whose ancestors originally came from Africa. This refers to the earlier assertion made above that the African liberation struggle was started or carried on by Africans in diasporas and later joined by Africans in their homeland.

The reason for Pan-Africanism according to Legun was very easy to understand because the blacks were seen as slaves who have been made homeless by their transfer to foreign countries and subjected to alien cultures from all ramifications. This shows that they are outcasts who are only good at labouring on the plantation of their masters, being robbed of their dignity as human beings, being used as machines, and with no claim of being of equal value in the sight of God. On this last premise, African theology employs the Gospel message as a tool for liberation in the African continent. Ajala (1973) referred also to the emergence of Pan-Africanism as a recognition of racial solidarity due to racial discrimination under the pressure of colonialism, led by Africans themselves in different parts of the world, to the awareness of their blackness and common heritage. From the perspective of movement, Obijekwu, Muomah and Onebunne (2018) expressed that:

It becomes a trend in human affairs and society at large; a movement, towards freedom or total independence. Pan-Africanism was championed by African descendants, or African Americans, who had like minds towards the liberation of Africa and securing freedoms, justice, and equality for themselves in their sojourn land. Its thrust was to fight against racism, colonialism, slavery, discrimination segregation, social justice, inequality, exploitation, dehumanization, and all other sorts of social evils that came with the colonizers. (pp. 223-224).

From the above explanation, it means that Pan-Africanism aimed to fight for African independence, or rather it involves the reposition of African sovereignty. It is purely a movement for African liberation and independence and proper repositioning.

The Pan-African Congresses reached another dimension or stage of development when African nations began to gain their independence one after the other. But it reached its apogee with the establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in May 1963 with the view of achieving genuine African unity. With the end of the Second World War, African people according to Legum (1966) who by the accident of colonial expansion, happen to find themselves in a particular territory become the constituent elements of the new nation. The focus started shifting from Pan-Africanism to African nationalism on the African continent. African nationalism arose in response to African demands for independence and freedom from foreign rule. This was a kind of unifying factor among the African people who transcended tribal or ethnic interests. Geiss (1968) observed that Pan-Africanism and African Nationalism were interconnected even though they were not identical.

The combined forces or influences of Pan-Africanism and African Nationalism are seen in the writings of the early African theologians, that is, their emphasis on political self-determination, and the preservation of the African cultural-religious heritage, these inspired the early African theologians who were influenced by the political domination of the Western world meted out to Africans (Muzorewa, 1985). These movements provided the general basis and context upon which liberation theology is done by African theologians. So, ideally speaking, Pan- Africanism and African Nationalism are the most important factors that contributed to the emergence of African liberation theology because they involve or express the desire for African unity among all people whose ancestors originally came from Africa. This has helped Africans to stimulate and rediscover their values, at the same time relate the Christian Gospel to African culture.

The Roles of The Concerns of African Liberation Theology Towards Being Authentic African

As earlier noted, African liberation theology emerges and seeks to reflect and solve the problems of millions of African people oppressed in various ways in and outside of the African continent. Having based its reflection on the gospel and experiences of black people, it advocates eradicating injustices in all forms and establishing a society that is fair and just for everyone. This will lead to the building of a just society for human society where injustice is minimally reduced. Everything about liberation theology centres mostly on the well fair of the poor, uplifting the poor, and establishing the oppressed poor to the normal life of human dignity. So, liberation theology in general can be applied to several places and areas of life where minorities and poor people suffer oppression and injustices. This is why we can see or hear liberation theologies that emerged from different places as we rightly have today: Black liberation theology, Feminist liberation theology, Asian liberation theology, Biafran liberation theology, and hence African liberation theology.

As of today, these liberation theologies are no longer based on the foundation of fixed theological formulations but based on the ever-changing circumstances and human experiences undergone in the digitalized or globalized world daily. In the course of liberating African nations, many methodologies or means were applied depending on the type of condition or situation that existed in the place concerned. But at the root of all methodologies lies the gospel message as a means of liberation. According to Joseph (1970), this gospel message in the light of liberation theology seeks to interpret the condition of the oppressed people in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Here the theologians or the scholars are attempting to interpret the Christian faith (the gospel) to make it concrete with the African's quest for freedom and liberation. In this way, the dignity of Africans will be restored among the other continents of the world with equal status.

Describing the situation or the picture of the African continent in the past few years and even now by many scholars, it shows the sorry state of African nations. According to Oborji (2005), it looks like a scene from a horror film while Cone (1979) describes the African situation as being in a moral crisis, material crisis, and spiritual crisis. African people seem unable to effectively counter disruptive forces that undermine their quality of life. Africans seem unable to collectively define their situation, discover the nature of their problems, and develop sustained coalitions that can resolve their dilemma. In the same vein, Mbefo (1996) describes the African situation in terms of slavery and servitude which today is causing a brain drain all over Africa with its labour shortages as its consequence in different sectors of life. He described it as thus:

...the opening out into opportunities of enhanced socio-economic living linked to the high technologies of the Western countries should not be total nor unbridled. For an African without sufficient skills and qualifications to decide to abandon his fatherland in pursuit of low-grade jobs in Europe or America in the hope of cheap money would amount to a new form of enslavement, "slavery in reverse gear". It is an enslavement that is now freely chosen rather than unwillingly imposed. (pp. viii-ix).

This means that the African liberation theology is tackling the issues of racism meted out against Africans, political instability among African nations caused by bad government and dictatorial rule, poor economic conditions, mass illiteracy, manipulation of Africa by the industrialized nations, countless wars and massive corruption going daily in Africa.

African theology being a contextual theology aims to take African realities, conditions, and situations seriously, in terms of solving the crises bedeviling Africans. It also aims at motivating Africans to appreciate who they are and authentically live the life of Africans in all dimensions. According to Umeh (2017),

it is a theology that uses the past to build the present so that the future will stand on a solid foundation. It is a theology of the present because it takes the present realities seriously and tries to answer the question; what will Jesus of Nazareth do if he

should come to Africa now? He will not be happy with the miserable situation in which Africans live. (p. 97).

This means that it is a theology that argues that the situation of poverty, suffering, oppression, drain brain, and exploitation as they exist in African nations today. Some politicians in Nigeria recently repeated the above issue that God will not be happy that people are dying of hunger, banditry, and ritual killings, so they proposed a new Nigeria where all things can work again for the good of the common people. So African liberation theology helps Africans to revitalize or rediscover or reflect on their situation of things.

African liberation theology aims at purifying the cultural values of African people which in the past or even now were not in conformity with modern-day development but it seeks to purify or examine those elements of African culture that can positively contribute to the liberation of Africans and to project them with the other cultures of the world. This of course involves decolonizing the mental attitude being carried around by Africans in their way of thinking and having been subjugated for centuries and brainwashed for years that their culture is a bad or fetish one. Ekwuru (1999) expressed the above thus:

Through this type of ideological framework, the colonized were psychologically conditioned to believe the fact that they embodied a human nature that was racially and culturally deficient. For this reason, then, all the elements of their cultural civilization were condemned and discredited. In the mission schools, they were taught that their religion was paganish and heathen, In which case then, the only way towards cultural salvation was to wash themselves clean of every bit of their low and inferior cultural givens, to imbibe the perks of a higher and superior culture from the hands of the colonizer. (p. 40).

Uzokuwu (1996) earlier expressed the same view that the Africans were treated as having neither culture nor religion nor social, economic, or political values worth preserving. This means a total change of identity of the African person, and culture and this led to the abandonment of the indigenous values to embrace those of the Western world. Indeed, most Africans as of today prefer to go back to those countries of the West and equally prefer goods made in foreign continents at the expense of made-in-African goods. African liberation theology seeks to restore confidence to the African people by reminding them that their cultural and religious values are good like other cultures of the world, culture can change and not be static.

African liberation theology aims at ending political instability and epileptic growth in economic growth in all African countries. The bad situation in African countries necessitated many African counties to keep borrowing for consumption, which leads to corruption, poor health care, brain drain, poverty, and so on. There is no economic plan for the future growth of the country, the African leaders try by all means to remain in power till death even when incapacitated. There are no strong institutions in African countries that can

support democratic governance rather what they have are strong individuals that steal and impoverish the country. The colonial masters continue to exploit the raw materials in the African countries, thereby continuing to under-develop the African countries. On how Europe underdeveloped Africa, Rodney (2009) commented:

It is also worth noting that Africa was denied the opportunity of developing healthy trade links with parts of the world other than Europe and North America. Some trade persisted across the Indian Ocean, but on the whole, it is fair to say that the roads in Africa led to the seaports and the sea lanes led to Europe and North America. That kind of lopsidedness is today part of the pattern of underdevelopment and dependence. (p. 280).

African liberation theology is a theology that deals or concerns itself with human development, evangelization, and growth of the Christian faith. Hence, it encourages people to take their political responsibilities seriously and merely wait for divine intervention (Umeh, 2017). This is also about taking up handwork and building small-scale industries than waiting for miracles to be millionaires without handwork or products. Equally, on the global level, African liberation theology calls for the need to dismantle the unjust existing world economic policies and political policies that are dehumanizing for immigrants, especially from Africa.

African liberation theology also concerns itself with the end of the wars and coups going on within the African countries. This forestalls peace and development in Africa in general. Okafor (1997) reported that:

For the continent of Africa, the year 1994 was a year of disaster. Across the continent, there was lamentation and great suffering caused by genocidal and fratricidal wars. It was a year of ethnic plague. In Rwanda, east of Africa, the ethnic conflict between the Tutsis and Hutus was climaxed by the gruesome massacre of thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus. On the west coast of Africa, Liberia was being ravaged by an internecine war. Nigeria, on the other side, was on the brink of civil war following renewed crisis on the annulled 12 presidential election results. In the northern fringes of Ghana, a bloody ethnic confrontation had erupted leaving many people dead. Northwards, Somalia was bleeding as the two rival factions engaged themselves in bloody combat. In Sudan, too, military operations were mobilized against secessionist groups, killing many and rendering others homeless. Thus, the ill wind of ethno-religious conflicts blew across Africa leaving in its trail unprecedented human, economic, social, and ecological disasters. (p. vi).

From the above, it is obvious that African liberation theology is advocating for the love of the neighbours which knows no limitations nor religious bounds but love that addresses communally the basic issues affecting Africans as a continent.

Conclusion

The struggle for African liberation theology as an ideology and as a movement ought to be continued to improve the living conditions or standards of the African people lavishing in poverty, injustices, poor health care, instability of all kinds, and so on. This of course when taken care will improve the freedom needed for proper development. Just like the church in Africa has been making efforts to address the issues of human freedom and rights which has been a mere fantasy in the African continent. The manipulative actions of some foreign countries for their selfish gain also need to be curtailed to achieve maximum peace and development among Africans.

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