Article

Revisiting the Historical Presence of Inculturation Liturgies and Moving Towards Liberative Africanist Liturgies

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Abstract

Ancestors play a critical role in African life and traditions. They are critical to how morality in Africa is conceptualised. Ramose and others have exposed that life in Africa is lived holistically, and ancestors play a significant role in guiding the living. Among the key aspects of becoming an ancestor is dying a natural death, having played an upstanding role in the community and having an offspring. Recognising these key parts of the criteria, this paper seeks to explore what natural death means in the face of coloniality and conquest. This paper argues that coloniality has not only killed the flesh but the living-dead. This being the case, I advance the argument that the history and presence of inculturation liturgies do not address the issue of double death. This causes a problem with the way morality is conceptualised using the African ancestral framework. Unnatural death in this paper refers to deaths that occur as a result of sickness, murder, and accidents, for instance. I argue, therefore, that ontic and epistemic death is unnatural. Addressing Christians who embrace African spirituality and Christianity, this paper advocates for the adoption of a liberative-liturgical praxis. In such a liberative-liturgical praxis, recognising the wounds and deaths of our ancestors epistemically and ontically becomes a critical part of our worship. This paper concludes by avowing that the integration of epistemic and ontic reflections of the wounds of those who have passed can play a critical liberative-reconstructive role liturgically, in the manner in which morality is framed for the African Christian society. Methodologically, this paper uses the desk research method, which is literature-based and requires no empirical research methods.

Keywords: liturgies; wounds; epistemic reflection; African morality; liberative; ancestors; ethics

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Introduction

The question of the relevance of ancestors in the framing of African morality is asked and continues to be discussed by some African scholars, such as Ukwamedua (2018), Igboin (2022), and others. The question arises in the context of perpetual violence in different forms, whether it is racial, financial, or sexual. The question is, where are the ancestors in the context of colonial oppression? In this paper, I will argue that colonial violence kills not only the flesh but also attempts to kill ancestors known as the living-dead, usurping their moral agency to continue with violence. In this paper, recognising African wholism, guided by the intersections of the living and the dead (ancestors) and recognising their importance in the moral formation in Africa, I call for liberative Christian liturgies. I argue that the wounds of our ancestors should become a liturgical expression and a rich source of epistemic reflection that will allow us to challenge, think, and reflect about human relations. In the first part of the paper, I draw our attention to discussions on the role of ancestors in the moral formation of those who are living. Secondly, I will discuss the intersections of ancestral moral formation and the challenges birthed by such a context in the face of colonial violence. Thirdly, by acknowledging the bodies of those who do not qualify as ancestors, similarly, transgressing Christian liturgies that fail to recognise the wounds of these bodies caused by racialised and sexualised violence, I contend that the wounds of our ancestors should become part of our liturgy with the intent that they become sites of epistemic reflections that will challenge our own notions of race, sex, and patriarchy. Methodologically, this paper uses the desk research approach. In this paper, I engage existing literature on the subject.

Ancestors and Their Ethical Contribution to the African Society

Ancestors, described by Ramose (1999) as "living-dead," play a critical role in the moral formation of the African society. The role they play in the moral formation of Africans is not divided according to a dichotomy of the spiritual and the material. The spiritual, in the form of the living-dead, plays a critical role in the moral construction of the African polity. According to Mekoa (2019, 99–103), those who have departed, the living-dead, care for the welfare of the family and ensure that there are moral obligations in place for African families to be taken care of. Mekoa (2019) describes how this responsibility is usually given to the head of the family, who is to be the father of the home, and for him to ensure that he provides for the family. Mekoa (2019) argues that ancestors bless families and protect them but can also curse them using sickness and other forms to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The family would then be responsible for ensuring that it corrects its errors by consulting the ancestors if there is a curse over it (Mekoa 2019). Another issue raised by Mekoa (2019, 99–103) is that when it came to ancestors, children and elderly people had a moral obligation to respect and obey authority on family and community levels.

According to Igboin (2022, 107–117), to become an ancestor, there is a set of criteria that have been a subject of contention, which we shall engage below. Igboin (2022, 107–117), for instance, notes that for someone to qualify as an ancestor, one must die at a ripe age. This is one of the key criteria. This, in essence, means that if one dies at a young age, one does not qualify to become an ancestor. Igboin (2022) notes that a ripe or old age has largely depended on the determination of various African communities. For example, according to Igboin (2022), old age is 70. Another critical point noted by Igboin (2022) is that to become an ancestor, one must be married and one must have children, as the failure to procreate means that one cannot become an ancestor. If a man could not procreate, he needed to allow his blood relative, such as a brother, to impregnate his wife to qualify to become an ancestor (Igboin 2022, 108–114).

Some issues constitute a bad death. According to Igboin (2022, 107–114), bad death refers to unnatural deaths such as accidents and deaths associated with sickness and diseases, which a community has determined and can disqualify one from becoming an ancestor. Another issue that may disqualify one from becoming an ancestor is when one is a child who passes away, leaving the parent behind, as this is also believed to be a bad death (Igboin 2022, 108–114). This particular rule with regards to a child leaving parents behind can only be overruled under certain exceptions in which such a person is old or is at the age of 70 when it happens (Igboin 2022). Igboin does not provide clarity regarding how the age of 70 is determined in terms of calculations. Similar to the others we shall discuss, Igboin (2022) also notes how capitalism and urbanisation have disturbed and challenged the way this criterion has been understood.

Exploring the ontological status of ancestors, Ukwamedua (2018, 24–40) argues that the ontological status of ancestors has become problematic in African post-modern states. He argues that post-modern African states rarely rely on the African ancestral framework as a moral guide (Ukwamedua 2018, 34–36). This, he argues, is because of several factors. One of the key issues he pays attention to is the role that globalisation has played in the erosion of African cultures in post-modern African states (Ukwamudua 2018, 24–40). He argues that the moral bankruptcy of African leaders, for instance chiefs who participate in immoral acts such as corruption, at best exposes the irrelevancy of the ancestral framework for morality (Ukwamuedua 2018, 24–40). Ukwamedua (2018) argues that systems of governance have significantly changed. Systems from pre-colonial Africa times are not currently accepted norms of governance. Noting a similar problem that Igboin (2022) reflected on, he notes that problems of post-modern African states have challenged this framework. These challenges led him to conclude, however, that the African ancestral framework for morality is irrelevant for post-modern African states and that perhaps ancestors should be allowed to rest and finally sleep (Ukwemudua 2018).

Agije (2022, 251–261) challenges this line of thought by arguing that the ancestral framework is still relevant for today's society. According to Agije (2022, 251–261), this line of thinking falls short by failing to recognise the role that the growth of Christianity

and Islam has played in the erosion of this moral framework. He challenges the very idea that ancestors need to be laid to rest, as the very naming of buildings, streets, and places in the African polity according to the names of ancestors signifies their importance in the African society. To counter this argument, he refers to the customs and the festivals the Yoruba people participate in memory of those who made a significant contribution to society (Agije 2022). In this case, the festivals that Agije (2022) pays attention to are the *Egungun* and the *Oro* festivals. He does this to expose the significance of ancestors and the worship of deities in Africa. Agije argues that ancestral veneration is still relevant in contemporary society. In agreement with Agije (2022), the ancestral framework is still relevant in the way he claims. In this paper, I attempt to argue for their relevance using what is negated, bad deaths. Whilst recognising their relevance in the way he discusses them, it is important to recognise the role that colonialism and coloniality play in altering how natural and unnatural deaths are understood.[1] I shall explore this in the next section.

Coloniality and its Violence towards the Living-dead

Colonialism and coloniality alter the way Africans relate to the living and the living-dead in such a way that it not only kills the flesh but attempts to kill the living-dead, usurping the moral agency of the living-dead by killing the young through racism, sexual violence, and crime. Diliza, who worked at a platinum mine, was laid off after having been diagnosed with asbestosis, and he is said to be struggling to make ends meet (Lucas Ledwaba 2023). In Diliza's case, it is the over-exposure to asbestos dumping sites, even as children growing up in and close to asbestos mining towns (Ledwaba 2023). The key concern in relation to Asbestos in this regard is acquiring a medical condition such as Asbestosis as a result of exploitative working conditions for the employee and how it also affects his family. Asbestosis is a disease caused by exposure to asbestos and affects the lungs (Braun and Kisting 2006). Asbestos is a type of material commonly used in construction. The apartheid government used asbestos to roof houses in townships[2], where marginalised people lived. Diliza's life is worth discussing in the context of this paper with reference to the criteria that determine who becomes an ancestor as discussed by Igboin (2022). Braun and Kisting (2006) expose how South Africa, which was once one of the largest asbestos producers, exposed not only mine workers to a toxic environment but also exposed their families to sickness in the past (Braun and Kisting 2006). They discuss this in the context of not only the participation of men in labour but also of women and children in the production of asbestos in the mines (Braun and Kisting 2006, 1389). One of the key issues exposed by their study is the impact of economic exploitation of marginalised people. They expose what they call the "invisible epidemic" caused by asbestos due to deplorable working conditions and human settlements that led to another asbestos-related disease

1 Coloniality in this case refers to the sustained mechanical systems of colonial violence that exist and are still operational in former colonies. These systems shape and frame knowledge production, ethics and metaphysics (Maldonado-Torres 2014).

2 The author of this article also comes from a township where some houses still have asbestos roofing.

called mesothelioma, a form of cancer caused by overexposure to asbestos (Braun and Kisting 2006). Braun and Kisting (2006) point out that this is caused by the evasion of occupational health and safety regulations in these mines. According to them, what has also been difficult is the lack of research on the subject of asbestos-related diseases in the mines (Braun and Kisting 2006). It is important to highlight how diseases like asbestosis or mesothelioma can disqualify a person from becoming an ancestor, especially in the context of the criteria discussed by Igboin (2022).

This discourse is not only limited to sickness, but how the exploitation has and continues to destabilise African marriages. Baloyi (2023) exposes the impact of urban-rural migration on African marriages. Critical to what Baloyi (2023, 162–171) highlights is that the desire for greener pastures in the metropoles, such as Johannesburg, has created a situation where men who migrate end up cohabiting with women without following or adhering to cultural practices. These practices played a crucial role in maintaining and regulating social responsibility in society. In examining the sanctity of marriage in the ancestral framework, what becomes evident is that the capitalistic exploitation enabled by the colonial empire destroys marriages in such a way that it can stop people from becoming ancestors according to the criteria discussed by Igboin (2022). In this context, what is evident is the problematic nature of attempting to preserve the ancestral moral framework. The need to provide for families forces people to work in difficult conditions in places such as mines, where they contract sicknesses. It is the very means of adhering to the moral duties of the African man in the African society per African customs that disqualifies the very same man from being an ancestor. Women have experienced the same. Heroes such as Steve Biko died in detention; Solomon Mahlangu died in detention; Ruth First was assassinated in exile; Victoria Mxenge was killed in front of her children in apartheid South Africa. Telang Mohai (37), Thembikile Mati (50), Cebisile Yawa (24), Nkosiyabo Xalabile (37), and the rest of the Marikana Massacre victims, whose racialised bodies by the exploitative efforts of coloniality through mines succumbed to death, are but an example of this.[3] Coloniality in this context refers to how the logics of colonialism continue to drive the mining sector. Campbell (2001) conducted a study on risky sexual behaviour prevalent amongst men in a mining town. The findings of the study revealed that economic exploitation experienced by miners, inability to live up to their financial responsibilities, and constant exposure to death in the workplace made life stressful (Campbell 2001). In the context of such a stressful environment, sex allowed these men to be vulnerable and experience pleasure even if it could come at a cost (Campbell 2001).

Considering the context of inequality and brutal violence forever present in South Africa, I argue that Maldonado-Torres (2014), who suggests that the conceptualisation of ethics becomes fundamentally distorted in the zones of non-being created by the colonial regime and Western modernity, is correct. He argues that this is primarily

3 https://mg.co.za/article/2016-08-16-remembermarikana-the-37-miners-killed-at-marikana-on-13-and-16-august-2012/

caused by the power structures of colonial and Western modernity. According to Maldonado-Torres (2014, 704), ethics is not possible in a zone of unfree relational beings. Maldonado-Torres (2014) argues that Western modernity in spaces of non-being affects and distorts human relationality. This argument substantiates challenges like crime because of severe poverty and inequality, and dysfunctional marriages because of colonial exploitation. Sickness and disease all alter the way criteria for becoming an ancestor are understood as a result of Western modernity. He argues that the only way decolonial ethics can attempt to do something is when those in the zone of non-being, the sub-other, reach out to each other in love (2014, 707). This, he argues, is a proper political and ethical commitment (2014, 707).

It is important to recognise the wounds of marginalised bodies theologically as sites of epistemic reflection. Wounds and death require that we critically reflect not only on racial violence but sexual violence as well. Considering these deaths, sickness, and instability, there are critical theological questions to ask. One crucial question is how many ancestors are left in the context of conquest and colonial South Africa, and how do they deal with the ongoing racial and sexual violence in South Africa? It is a question of loss in the context of violence on the African continent where a wholistic ethic is endorsed. It is where ancestors play a primary role in the protection, blessing, and sustenance of the people. It is a question from the context of violence, a question where Western modernity alters the way we relate to the African ancestral moral framework.

Discussing Ubuntu, Ramose (1999) argues that life in Africa is based on the onto-triadic structure of being, which describes three levels of human existence. The first is the ontology of invisible beings known as the living-dead who influence life in society (Ramose 1999,46). It is the ontology of unknown beings who are believed to have moral influence over society (Ramose 1999, 46). The second one is the invisible ontology of unknowable Great one *uNkulu-Nkulu*, to whom the world of Ubuntu is ascribed (Ramose 1999, 46). The third is the not yet born (Ramose 1999,46). Understanding human relationality in the African sense, according to Ramose (1999, 46), means that one cannot understand Ubuntu without understanding this onto-triadic structure and how it influences life. Ontologically, Ubuntu cannot be attained without the involvement of the living-dead (Ramose 1999, 46). Ramose here exposes the importance of ancestors in understanding human relationality in Africa and what they mean to Africa. How we understand them becomes an important site of theological reflection. Recognising the predominance of Christianity in a country like South Africa and those who simultaneously embrace the beliefs in African traditional religion, it argues that a liberative liturgical praxis is a critical tool for reflection on colonial violence.

Christian Liturgy as Liberative Praxis

Christian Liturgy has an important relationship with ethics. Ramsey (1979), who engages both ethics and liturgy, argues that there is an inextricable link between

theology, liturgy, and ethics. According to Ramsey (1979), liturgy is a response to the divine or an orientation towards an encounter with the divine in the form of praxis. Using Karl Barth, he argues that liturgy is not formless and has shape, usually expressed in various forms such as prayer, baptism, communion, preaching, and music play a critical role in theo-ethical formation (Ramsey 1979). While clearly noting that Barth does not speak about liturgy, he argues that liturgy is the human's response towards the divine (1979). Providing context to his discourse, he argues that there are various theologies with corresponding liturgies and ethics (Ramsey 1979,142). Showing this diverse nature, for instance, he uses the Eastern Orthodox Church to show how the symbolic use of lights during Easter midnight attempts to expose the importance of the redemption move in Christianity while showing how these liturgies differ in the West and Latin America (Ramsey 1979). In Latin America, for instance, he argues that they liturgically focus more on forgiveness and atonement (Ramsey 1979).

According to Saliers (1979), and similar to Ramsey (1979), contrary to Christian Social Teaching in the abstract sense, liturgy frames a Christian worldview that influences moral agency. Liturgy, according to him, is tied to Christian worship and is framed by thanksgiving, intercession, communal praise, and remembrance (Saliers 1979). These, he argues, create the framework for moral agency (Saliers 1979). Similarly, he attempts to show that there is an inextricable relationship between liturgy and ethics. Discussing the relationship between liturgy and ethics, this is what he has to say:

> The concretization of the moral life requires a vision of the world, and the continual exercise of recalling, sustaining and re-centering that picture of the cosmos in which norms and practices have a meaningful point (Sailers 1979, 174)

These aspects, such as remembering and the others he mentions, have a direct relationship with the formation of liturgical practices through the use of the bible. Continuing with this argument, he argues that myth or narratives of human existence express ideas of morality and suggests that the bible is at the heart of such stories (Saliers 1979, 179). To show this inextricable link between liturgy and ethics, he argues that before even liturgy, it must be remembered that Christ characterises the moral outlook in Christianity and becomes the subject of both liturgy and ethics (Saliers 1979,179). What makes the use of liturgy important for him is that liturgy in the form of praxis, such as prayer, the Eucharist and others, is that they must have a prophetic awareness as a divine and moral response to the world and its challenges (Saliers 1979, 183).

What should be crucial to note is the use of liturgies themselves in the process of colonialism. The idea of baptism, for instance, as a form of reorienting the black from barbarism is a result of colonialist civilisation's disgust towards African cultural practices (Keegan 2023). These discourses can be extended to the fact that liturgy from a Christian theological outlook more often centralises Christ as a mediator, theologically forgetting the ancestors. This has been expressed in the demonisation of African traditional religion. Mbembe's discourse on the hegemonisation of a monotheistic

(only) Christian God who presents himself as a jealous God attempts to expose how such theological hegemonisation expresses the way colonialism politically functions even in what is called post-colonial states (Mbembe 2015, 213–234). Ancestors are not gods but do form part of the divine within the African context.

The Historical Presence of Inculturation Liturgies

Different scholars trace the notion of Inculturation Liturgies and Theologies to the Second Vatican Council in 1962. Nche, Okwusa, and Nwaoga (2016) argue that the very idea of inculturation adopted by the Vatican and the Roman Catholic Church was to make it culturally adaptable to Africa so that it could resonate with Africans. Nche, Okwusa, and Nwaoga (2016) call for caution in the approach to inculturation theology with reference to Christian ecology. Their views reflect some of the sentiments presented by Pope John Paul VI at the Second Vatican Council. According to the *Sacrosanctum Concillium*, which was drafted in 1963 concerning liturgy and adaptation or what can be called inculturation:

> Provisions shall be made, when revisiting the liturgical books, for legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions and peoples, especially on mission lands, provided that the substantial unity of the Roman rite is preseered; and this should be born in mind when drawing the rites and the devising rubrics (John Paul VI 1963, 1D)

It must be noted that Section D of the *Sacrosanctum Concillium*, which is the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy penned down by Pope John Paul VI (1963), notes how complex the issue of adaptation is but outlines what care must be taken and to what extent adaptation can be applied. Crucial to note in this case is the extent to which liturgy is controlled. The challenge with regards to such liturgical reflection is also perhaps the transgression of the ontology of invisible beings, the living-dead who form part of what Ramose (1999) calls the onto-triadic structure of human existence in Africa. What also concerns this paper, then, is the extent to which such control plays a role in the annihilation of liturgical reflection on the bodies of those who are victims of colonialism and those who might not even meet the criteria of being an ancestor as discussed by Igboin (2022). The transgression of control perhaps exposes some of the challenges raised by Klassen and Kama (2023) and Wepener (2014). Klassen and Kama (2023) discuss the challenge of inculturation liturgies, for instance, faced by the Ethiopian Episcopal Church. According to Klassen and Kama (2023), the founders of this Ethiopian Church envisioned it to be a truly African Church that resonates with an African identity. The challenge, however, is that its association with the Roman Catholic Church liturgically has problematised that outlook (Klassen and Kama 2023). While many changes have taken place, such as the use of vernacular languages and vernacular music, ancestral veneration continues to be a contentious subject (Klassen and Kama 2023). They open up this discourse for further debate, signifying the relationship between worship, language, and identity formation from an African context. What should be critical to note in this case is that while inculturation liturgies have been

embraced, the issues of ancestor and ancestor veneration reveal a lack of epistemic sensitivity. Okigbo (2021, 9), who recognises liturgical inculturation in post-South African Catholicism, argues that the Zulu ritual of *isidlo senhlazeko*, which expresses the relationship between the living and their ancestors, is performed in such a way that it aligns with the Eucharist as celebrated by the Catholic Church. The key challenge of liturgy in this instance is perhaps its failure to critically reflect on the ontic and epistemic deaths brought about by the intersections of coloniality and Christianity.

Wepener (2014) discusses the emergence of Inculturation liturgies, which succeeded the Second Vatican Council that advanced the idea of liturgical reform. At the heart of the very idea of inculturation liturgies lies the idea of expressing an authentic African form of worship (Wepener 2014). This must be important to consider in light of the discourse of Saliers (1979) and Ramsey (1979) that draws a correlation between ethics and liturgy. According to Wepener, some churches in the Democratic Republic of Congo pursued inculturation liturgies while churches in South Africa, such as the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa adopted liturgies of liberative resistance, because of apartheid. Conducting a qualitative study on liturgies focusing on Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa and the Corinthian Church of South Africa, which is an African Initiated Church, he concludes that there is a necessity for the development of liturgies sensitive to both African religious realities and the socio-political context of Africans (Wepener 2014). In other words, Wepener calls for liberative liturgies. Liturgy, then in the context of this paper, is an orientation towards the divine and a theological response from such an encounter that is concerned with the wounds and the slain bodies of the oppressed.

Liberation and Liturgical Reconstruction

This paper argues that the creation of liturgies that place the wounds of black pain even in death at the centre becomes vital. Liturgies, as noted in the discourse above, express a world view and is a response to the divine (Ramsey 1979). Liturgical reconstruction recognises black bodies that are victims of colonial violence and considers these bodies as key sites of epistemic reflection. Reflecting on these bodies who do not meet the criteria for becoming an ancestor and those who are considered dead by Western Christianity allows those bodies to speak in such a way that they allow us to critically reflect on violence. Within the black Christian life, this allows us to see the attempt to kill black and African existence as a form of liberative prophetic self-awareness. Such wounds and graves must be viewed as sites that empower us with a critical orientation towards the world, particularly with reference to being black, African, and Christian.

Such liturgies will allow us to critically reflect on the bodies of family members, communities, spouses who die as a result of sickness, who die young, and who die as a result of racial and sexual violence. In this paper, liberative liturgies transgress the ancestral framework discussed by Igboin by recognising bodies believed to die as a result of bad death caused by sickness, sudden death, and young death. I argue that these

bodies, through their wounds, speak. They allow us to reflect on what it means to be African and black, queer, heterosexual, or trans human beings in "death" and what colonial violence does to our bodies. In this paper, I also attempt to transgress dominant Christian narratives that either send our brothers, sisters, and elders to the grave or heaven when befallen by death without critically and liturgically reflecting on black wounds and death. Such liberative liturgical reflection provides us with the day-to-day realities on the continent. Liturgically, these wounds allow us to critically reflect on our prejudices, our biases, and our traumas and provide a critical orientation that allows epistemic reflection and reconstruction. Such a liturgical praxis provides a theological orientation that allows us to reflect and shape our moral agency as black and African people. As I would like to un-concludingly suggest, they are not dead, young, or old, sick or healthy, they speak: Camagu!

Un-concluding Remarks

The primary argument this paper makes is that coloniality has not only killed the flesh but has also attempted to spiritually kill the living-dead by distorting discourses on morality in Africa. This distortion of what is considered natural and unnatural in the context of the Africanist moral framework is caused by colonial violence. Coloniality changes how ethics are understood through economic exploitation, the framing of marriages, sickness, and death. I have attempted to expose how coloniality has created a situation where Africans are condemned by both modernity and possibly the African ancestral framework. One begins to ask the question, who morally guides Africans in the context of the absence of ancestors, if we engaged the criteria?

In this paper, by transgressing the erasure of those who are believed to be called the living-dead according to African traditional religion as discussed by Igboin, and by Christian liturgies that do not recognise the wounds of these humans, I call for the liturgical recognition of the bodies of these ancestors. I believe that the liturgical recognition of these bodies of colonialist slain victims serves as a foundation on which liberative epistemologies can be formed. The purpose of this paper is not only to prescribe what such a liturgy would look like but also to advance the idea of creating liturgies that will allow these bodies to speak and turn them into sites of epistemic reflection. This, I argue, is crucial for moral reflection and agency.

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