



Coloniality, (Black) Theology and Liberation: Reflections on John Chilembwe

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the influence of Black liberation theology on the development work of the Providence Industrial Mission (PIM) in colonial times. It draws from previous research as well as new developments like the growing public interest in Chilembwe such as we saw in July 2021 when it was announced that the “Antelope”, a sculptural restaging of a photograph of Chilembwe and a British missionary in which the artist “elevated Chilembwe and his story, revealing the hidden narratives of underrepresented people in the history of the British Empire in Africa and beyond.”¹ Among the narratives that I would like to reflect on in this paper is the less spoken about link between Chilembwe’s theology and that of what we can term “early forms” of Black theology. In the context of this paper, I argue that early forms of Black theology influenced Chilembwe’s struggle against colonisation in the country now known as Malawi.

Introduction

This paper is primarily based on a dissertation I wrote titled “Black theology and the Pre-Independence Providence Industrial Mission” which focused on the influence of black liberation theology on the development work of the Providence Industrial Mission (PIM) in colonial times. My reflections in this paper also draw from new research and developments. Among these is the growing public interest in Chilembwe such as we saw in July 2021 when it was announced that the “Antelope”, a sculpture by Samson Kambalu, will be on the fourth plinth at Trafalgar. The “Antelope” is a sculptural restaging of a photograph of Chilembwe and a British missionary, John Chorley.² In the photograph taken in 1914 Chilembwe keeps his hat on in defiance of the colonial rule that forbade Africans from wearing hats in the presence of white people.³ In the sculpture, Kambalu increased Chilembwe’s scale making him appear larger than life while Chorley is life-size. In doing so, the artist “elevated Chilembwe and his story, revealing the hidden narratives of underrepresented people in the

¹ BBC. (2021, July 5). “Trafalgar Square fourth plinth: Winning design a 'Litmus Test' for Society.” *BBC News*. Retrieved April 26, 2022, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-57699300>

² See: Google. (n.d.). “Antelope by Samson Kambalu.” *Google Arts and Culture*. Retrieved April 26, 2022, from <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/antelope-mayor-of-london/jAVxRpJsLUeLoA?hl=en>

³ *Ibid.*

history of the British Empire in Africa and beyond.”⁴ One of those narratives that I would like to reflect on in this paper is the less spoken about link between Chilembwe’s theology and that of what we can term “early forms” of Black theology. In the context of this paper, I take Black theology to mean theology that contextualizes Christianity in an attempt to help Africans overcome oppression⁵ and restore human dignity in our black experience and identity.⁶

The Context: Hierarchies in Church and Colony⁷

I would like to begin by painting a picture of the context Chilembwe, a Christian convert in colonial times found himself in. Before doing so let me clarify that this reflection follows frameworks that collapse the supposed binaries between faith and e.g. politics or the private and the public. Some question whether theologians “claim” Reverend Chilembwe too much. They posit that we should see him more and more as a national, political liberator who just happened to be a church minister. However, as scholars like Mohamad Amer Meziane⁸ and Ousmane Kane⁹ have argued in respect to the contexts of North and West Africa, respectively, that religion is no private matter in Africa and elsewhere. Protestant ideas that generated secularist confluences of privacy and belief have overwhelmed how we approach the agency of people like Chilembwe. Therefore, I frame this paper under the view that recognizes Chilembwe as many things, a Christian minister and a person who was actively engaged with the socio-political and socio-economic concerns of his community at Providence Industrial Mission.

⁴ BBC. (2021, July 5). “Trafalgar Square fourth plinth: Winning design a 'Litmus Test' for Society.” *BBC News*. Retrieved April 26, 2022, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-57699300>

⁵ See Burrow, Rufus Jr. (1994). *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company

⁶ See for example van Aarde, Timothy (2016). “Black theology in South Africa - A theology of human dignity and black identity.” *HTS Theological Studies*, 72(1), 1-9. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3176>

⁷ Intersection of empire and Eurocentric Christianity in the 18th-20th century

⁸ Meziane, Mohamad Amer (2021). “Islamophobia, state violence, public theologies.” *Political Theology Network*. Retrieved April 26, 2022, from <https://politicaltheology.com/islamophobia-state-violence-public-theologies/>

⁹ Keynote address at the 2018 Miriam Makeba keynote address to the General Assembly of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the largest and oldest pan-African body of African scholars. See: Marsh, Wendell Hassan (2022). “The ultimate end of decolonization. Africa Is a Country.” Retrieved April 26, 2022, from https://africasacountry.com/2022/01/the-ultimate-end-of-decolonization?fbclid=IwAR24U5YO6lkac-XOTsEhmi15eBC2uqEB_NI31jSEf-cglmKIWwZ2_ilmeEc

Regarding Chilembwe's context, at the time of his return from the United States in 1900, Malawians (or Nyasa's at the time) were impacted by several social factors. The Indian Ocean slave trade was still active in some areas along the Swahili coast and the related idea of black Africans as *shensi* (sic) – “savages”, the Arab-Swahili word “savages”¹⁰ or “wild and uncultured people”¹¹ were very much alive. Additionally, there was colonization and the growing activity of missionaries - many of whom shared the values of colonial administrators in their interpretation of Christianity and whiteness. There was also the presence of church communities that had contextualised Christianity or at least drew from some empowerment. Some examples are The Blackman's Church of African Presbyterian and other African Independent Churches such as the Topia Church or Chilembwe's PIM church itself.¹² Overall, it was a time that Africans were not included in any important decision making on the continent as African opinions were not considered unnecessary despite colonial rhetoric and missionary voices emphasizing the opposite.¹³

I do not want to paint a single story of what it was like for Africans who aspired to be church and community leaders in the face of racism and prejudice. However, in the interest for further fleshing out the general context, I want to point you to the case of the “two Jacobs”. The two Jacobs are my bringing together from the 18th century the freed Ghanaian, Jacobus Capitein¹⁴ and from the 19th century, freed Malawian Jacob Wainright whose Yao name was Yamuza.¹⁵ Both Jacobus and Jacob had been rescued from slavery as children. The former was freed from the transatlantic slave trade and the latter from the Indian Ocean slave trade. They were both converted and educated in Christianity in the Netherlands and British colonized India, respectively. Both showing an aptitude for education but uncritical of their situation, at least by our standards today and owing to their gratitude for being freed by

¹⁰ See for example Gappa, Petina (2019). *Out of Darkness, Shining Light*. New York, Scribner. A Novel.

¹¹ Menger, Tom Q. (2016). “The origins of colonial violence: The perpetrator's view: A study of colonial soldiers and their ego-documents in German East Africa, 1890-1908.” A Master's thesis. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.

¹² Morris, Brian. 2009. *Wildlife and Landscapes in Malawi: Selected Essays on Natural History*. Victoria, B.C.: Trafford Publishing, 200.

¹³ For an overview, see for example *Risen Africa*, “How Leopold beat European Powers to Win the Congo”. 13 November, 2021. Available online: <https://youtu.be/myHKhzBc7iQ>.

¹⁴ Real name not available in records. Capitein was born ca. 1717 and died in 1747.

¹⁵ c. 1859 – April 1892.

Christian Europeans, they aspired to return home and serve God as Europeanised Christian missionaries as that was the only interpretation of Christianity they had been exposed to and immersed in. Neither of them became successful missionaries in the long-term as they faced pressure from both white communities they encountered in Ghana and eastern Africa, respectively; and fellow Africans who were distrustful of their adopted religion and Europeanised outlook.

Jacob Wainwright or rather, Yamuza's story - as one of the young converts that accompanied David Livingstone on his last journeys is fictionalized (but based on research) by Petina Gappa¹⁶ and its foregrounds are discussed particularly in the following quotes:

1. *I felt certain that I had the calling of a missionary. I was to be Shepherd among His Flock, attending to the Salvation and Moral Elevation of my heathen brothers and sisters. When I told this to the Reverend Isenberg (one of his teachers), he said only, "Well, well. Let us not get ahead of ourselves because you do, of course, labour under the unfortunate disadvantage of being black."*¹⁷
2. *(Speaking of Livingstone, Yamuza said): It grieved me sorely that he seemed to be of the same mind as those of my old teachers who thought that those of the Black Race had no need for knowledge that we could not directly apply, that we should limit our learning only to the skills that we could use to assist the explorers and missionaries as they went into our natal land, that our knowledge should be limited to that which we could do with our hands.*¹⁸
3. *It seemed to me that my time had come. I opened up my heart in Thanksgiving because finally I could work as a missionary. But when I arrived in Buganda, it became clear that the Reverend Mackay, the mission leader, would not let me do any missionary work at all. I was supposed only to interpret and explain, and not do any preaching or converting. And what is more, the missionary expected me to serve him as his personal attendant, as though I were some low servant or base slave!*¹⁹
4. *But it was when I talked at length about my wish for a mission that things changed for me: it was when I talked about the hearts that I would turn to Christ, and about the ones I had already baptised, that the promising beginning came to nothing at all. In just a few months, I said, I had turned seventeen to God, more than the Doctor ever had in his entire lifetime. I told them I baptised them in a river, and gave them new names. Instead of their receiving this news with joy, I was met with consternation. I had acted without the authority of a bishop or any Mission, they said. I was no missionary. Worse, they said I was boastful and arrogant, and my learning had gone to my head and driven out all humility. It was a pity, Mr. Waller said, I had learned nothing from the Doctor I had had the good fortune to travel with. In my anger I*

¹⁶ Gappa, Petina. (2019). *Out of Darkness, Shining Light*. New York, Scribner. A Novel.

¹⁷ Gappa, *Out of Darkness, Shining Light*, 124.

¹⁸ Gappa, *Out of Darkness, Shining Light*, 115.

¹⁹ Gappa, *Out of Darkness, Shining Light*, 280.

spoke unwisely. For it was then that I spoke of Bwana Daudi's association with the slave raiders Tippoo Tip and Kumba Kumba, and the ready assistance that they had rendered him in his time of need. The Society openly turned against me then. Not only was I boastful, arrogant, and disrespectful of authority, they said, I was also an ingrate who rained calumny on the Doctor's name.²⁰

Such was the attitude of missionaries. It is not surprising that African converts were a curiosity and their decision to convert or become church/mission leaders were questioned. For instance, according to Joseph Booth,²¹ Chilembwe is said to have narrated the following:

I often preach in my native village, but the chief and many people will not hear now. One day after preaching my older brother came to me and said, "you preach just now that God's message is to go to all people and tell a good message to them. How do you know?" I answered "because I can read it for myself both in the English tongue and in my own language. I have God's Book." He said "but perhaps white men have altered God's book to suit themselves and so they teach, preach peace to us. Perhaps God's book does not say this to white men; perhaps it says to them go to all people, take their land; kill the people, I give you power. If God's word said to them, what they preach to us, 'not to steal, not to kill,' would they not do it? I cannot receive the words which the white men have brought."²²

Like Booth who "struggled with what the gospel had to say about their presence in Africa [...] while many missionaries either actively encouraged or passively watched the expansion of colonial authority,"²³ Chilembwe's theology seems to reflect the hermeneutics of Booth²⁴ and that of the African American seminary he had attended which we will look at next.

Chilembwe and the NBC

Briefly, John Chilembwe had started out as Booth's house servant whom Booth went on to educate. He took Chilembwe to the United States of America in 1897 when Chilembwe was around the age of 26. Chilembwe attended seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia at the Virginia

²⁰ Gappa, *Out of Darkness, Shining Light*, 280.

²¹ In Joseph Booth's 1897 appeal to Queen Victoria, to the British and American Christian people and "specially to the Afro-American people of the United States of America" to whom he sent John Chilembwe in the same year. Perry, Laura. 2008. *Africa for the African*. A Reprint edited by Laura Perry. Zomba: Kachere Publishers, 69.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ When in 1915 Chilembwe was killed after leading a nationalist Rising against the British, though Booth was a pacifist and had no foreknowledge of the event, his relationship to Chilembwe led him to be deported from both Lesotho and South Africa in 1915. Perry, *Africa for the African*, 69.

Theological Seminary and College, (now Virginia University of Lynchburg), an institution of the African American National Baptist Convention. He was ordained after completing his studies and returned to Malawi with the blessing of the NBC. Unlike the two Jacobs, he had been empowered to establish a successful mission and he did so with the PIM. He proved, or rather reminded his community that when given the opportunity, Nyasa's/Malawians could adapt their pre-colonial skills to the demands of their time by initiating projects they found useful and relevant for their holistic development.

Some of the ways Chilembwe's focus at the PIM implies early forms of black theology that he might have interacted with at the Virginia Theological Seminary and College is the application of a holistic ethos, that is the combination of orthodoxy (that is, Baptist faith according to the NBC where he was ordained), and orthopraxy (the interpretation of belief in daily life). Some manifestations were the pursuit of self-determination – as a community, the PIM had determined their own projects and built their own church building at a time when most imposing churches in Nyasaland were built under European supervision. Thus, they were independent in their practice of faith and worship.

They were also self-organised in a time when it was either missionaries or the colonial government supervised organised or supervised Christian education. For instance, Ida Chilembwe (the wife of John Chilembwe) co-ordinated programmes among the women and the children including Sunday School. Chilembwe was committed to pastoral work and leadership in the methods he felt the community needed to assert themselves and restore their dignity as black people within that context. It seems that some of these methods such as his emphasis on literacy, a “smart” dress code, etc. were based on Western standards. This could be because at the time of his studies at Lynchburg, the emphasis of black theology was on race. Whereas today, thanks to the influence of South African black theology especially, African pride has been (re)sought by scholars like Vuyani Vellem who argue that “blackness” is not to be found in colonizing and coercing missionary institutions [...] but in the irruption of a faith that refused patronage, rejected racial inequality and signification by others.²⁵ On the whole, Chilembwe is popularly recognized in Malawi for founding the PIM as “the birthplace of revolutionary ideas that instilled in Africans a sense of self-worth and the

²⁵ Vellem, Vuyani. 2013. The “Native Experiment”: the formation of the Bantu Presbyterian Church and the defects of faith transplanted on African soil. *Missionalia*. 41. 146-162. 10.7832/41-2-11.

determination to free themselves from the clutches of colonial oppression.”²⁶ We honour John Chilembwe every 15th January.

Chilembwe and Violence

Finally, but not least important is the question of the violence that marked the end of Chilembwe’s work only 15 years after he had returned from Lynchburg. His early mentor was known as a pacifist and a later, famous graduate of Chilembwe’s alma mater, Dr. Martin Luther King was also famously pacifist. Therefore, we can deduce that that was the seminary’s position on armed conflict in the face of oppression. However, although there is no evidence that Chilembwe sought armed conflict in the years before the Chilembwe Uprising²⁷ in 1915, based on incidents his writing a letter to the *The Nyasaland Times* in Blantyre, asking that colonial authorities keep black troops of World War 1²⁸, we can deduce that within the framework of Meziame and Kane above, Chilembwe had a holistic approach to faith, daily life and politics.

Conclusion: So, what happened? Did his theology lead to the uprising? There is some debate. Some scholars argue that Chilembwe may have simply been frustrated by the attitude of the colonial administration that undermined and then sought to stifle the autonomy PIM. They add, seemingly in condescension, that a vision impairment negatively affected his coping skills in the face of resistance to his work. My position is that more research needs to be done to uncover how his vision for decolonized Christianity impacted his decisions in those last days. Uncovering such knowledge more fully will not only help us understand Chilembwe’s contribution to Malawi’s liberation struggle but also shed more light on his beliefs about liberation struggles. This can be a helpful a Malawian contribution of theologies of struggle and liberation.

²⁶ See *Catholic University of Malawi* n.d. “Attractions.” Retrieved April 26, 2022, from <https://www.cunima.online/attractions/>

²⁷ *Chilembwe Uprising*. Wikiwand. (n.d.). Retrieved April 26, 2022, from https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Chilembwe_uprising

²⁸ “As I hear that, war has broken out between you and other nations, only white men, I request, therefore, not to recruit more of my countrymen, my brothers who do not know the cause of your fight, who indeed, have nothing to do with it ... It is better to recruit white planters, traders, missionaries and other white settlers in the country, who are, indeed, of much value and who also know the cause of this war and have something to do with it ... (original syntax and grammar)”. Taken from Rotberg, Robert Irwin. (1967). *Strike a Blow and Die: A Narrative of Race Relations in Colonial Africa* by George Simeon Mwase. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. OCLC 184725, 33–4.

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