



Is the Methodist Church of Southern Africa an African Church or a Church in Africa? A Decoloniality Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

The study set out to explore whether the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) is an African Church or a British Church operating in Africa. This is a fundamental question because it affects the MCSA's mission, doctrines, and relevance to its black African membership. The question is critical, given the MCSA's vision of "a Christ-healed Africa for the healing of nations." The study first reconnoitered the milestones achieved by the MCSA to position itself as well as respond to Southern African challenges after its independence from the British Methodist church. Thereafter, available and relevant literature was reviewed to argue that, since the MCSA's autonomy from the British Methodist Church in 1927, there has been an imbalance between the British Methodist heritage and the African-ness of the MCSA in its theology and its practices. This study argued that it compromises its witness and relevance to its black African membership. A decoloniality paradigm is explored in this regard. The study concluded with recommendations for further research and conversation on how the MCSA could be a more African Church. The study contributes to the ongoing conversations and scholarship in the MCSA on contextual theology, African theology, and decolonisation of its theology and doctrines.

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Publication History

Received:
16th September, 2024
Accepted:
17th January, 2025
Published online:
14th February, 2025

Keywords: MCSA, African Church, Decoloniality.

INTRODUCTION¹

In Southern Africa, Methodism was spread through the work of missionaries of the British Methodist Church until the independence of the South African Conference. At the time, the Transvaal District was known as the Wesleyan Methodist Church of South Africa.² During that period, the Methodist Church had two streams: the District of the Cape Colony and the District of the Orange Free State, known as the Methodist Church. The two streams of the church were united in 1928.³ Thus, the Transvaal district became the Wesleyan Methodist Church, and the district of Cape Colony and the district of the Orange Free State became known as the Methodist Church. Each of these districts

¹ The article is derived from a paper presented by the author at a theological symposium titled "African Methodist Theology: Intercultural Explorations," hosted by the University of Stellenbosch, May 16-20, 2023.

² The Methodist Church, *The Methodist Book of Order: The Laws of Discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa*, 12th ed. (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 12.

³ Mokhele Johannes Singleton Madise and L M Taunyane, *The Methodist Church in Africa, 1933-2001* (Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, 2012).

operated independently and their conferences took place in South Africa. In the year 1932, the Transvaal missions were also integrated into the South African Conference.⁴ It must be noted that the Transvaal mission included the Transvaal and Swaziland.⁵ Later on, the Transvaal mission expanded to include Botswana, which then constituted a missionary field known as a district of the British Conference and was led by leading figures such as Owen Watkins, George Weavind, and Amos Burnet. What made this district unique was that it was started as a missionary district of the British Conference⁶ and was financed, as well as staffed, by the British Wesleyan Church.⁷ In 1928, a resolution was taken overseas that the Transvaal District would be part of the Wesleyan Methodist Church.⁸ Eventually, in 1932, all the Methodist families in Southern Africa joined together as one.⁹

Over the years, there have been various conversations in the MCSA about decolonisation, Africanisation and contextual theology. These conversations are discussed in detail later on in the article. A conversation that stands out is a conversation currently taking place on *Ukuthwasa*, (a Zulu¹⁰ word used to refer to the process of being initiated as a traditional healer) led by the Doctrine, Ethics, and Worship Committee.¹¹ In his article titled “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa,” Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that,

“Schools, colleges, churches, and universities in Africa are sites for the reproduction of coloniality. We so far do not have African universities. We have universities in Africa. They continue to poison African minds with research methodologies and inculcate knowledge of equilibrium.”¹²

One often wonders, if the MCSA gained independence from the British Methodist Church in 1927, why did a conversation about African ontology and epistemologies take place ninety-six years later? This study identified this as a gap that needs to be explored in-depth as to whether the MCSA is an African Church or a British Church in Africa. The question is critical, given the MCSA’s vision of “a Christ-healed Africa for the healing of nations.”¹³ To do an in-depth investigation of this question, the study presents the historical background of Methodism in South Africa. It also provides the background of the MCSA. The Eurocentric Tendencies among Methodist Missionaries are examined as well as the case of Methodist Independence. The study further explores the case of the Methodist Church readjusting itself as an African Church.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background of the MCSA

When referring to Methodism in South Africa, a distinction should be made as there are many churches that align themselves with Methodism.¹⁴ In this article, the MCSA *connexion* refers to the largest denomination, which includes members in countries such as Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, and Mozambique. The largest membership is in South Africa, while all the neighbouring countries belong to the districts that are largely based in South Africa by geography and control. The word *connexion* in the MCSA is a historical and theological term that was used by both the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists. Pocock comments:

⁴ The Methodist Church, *The Methodist Book of Order: The Laws of Discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa*.

⁵ Msokoli William Leleki, *The Methodist Church and Society in Transvaal (1948-1976)* (University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2003).

⁶ Leleki, *The Methodist Church and Society in Transvaal (1948-1976)*, 14.

⁷ Leleki, *The Methodist Church and Society in Transvaal (1948-1976)*, 15.

⁸ Madise and Taunyane, *The Methodist Church in Africa, 1933-2001*, 2.

⁹ The Methodist Church, *The Methodist Book of Order: The Laws of Discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa*.

¹⁰ The Zulu language is one of the Nguni languages spoken in South Africa, predominately in the province of Kwazulu Natal.

¹¹ Methodist Church of Southern Africa, “Ukuthwasa and the Practice of Being a Traditional Healer: A Conversation within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa,” *DEWCOM*, 2023.

¹² Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa,” *History Compass* 13, no. 10 (2015): 389.

¹³ Methodist Church of Southern Africa, *Yearbook* (Methodist Publishing House, 2020), 12.

¹⁴ Wessel Bentley, “Methodism and Transformation in South Africa: 20 Years of Constitutional Democracy,” *HTS: Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 1–8.

This connexion structure has been described as ‘. . . resembling that of the Scottish Presbyterian churches in the order of the courts, in the relation they bear to one another and their respective constitutions and functions . . . a dynamic community connected by commitment and service.’¹⁵

The MCSA emerged out of the labor of the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, more than a century ago. The name “Methodist” came into being in 1729, during the student days of John and Charles at Christ Church, Oxford. Together with other like-minded and devout students, they were known as the “Holy Club,” and John was chosen to be president. Members of these Holy Club met six evenings every week to study the Scriptures and pray together. Due to the devout lives led by these members, fellow students mocked them and referred to them as “Bible moths.” It was this way of life that earned them the name “Methodists,” which was later adopted by John and Charles’s followers. The name “Methodists” later on came to identify a movement, and later a church. It was out of this work that Methodism spread rapidly in Britain and across other countries, where travelling converts continued to spread the gospel whenever they found themselves, thereby expanding the Methodist Church. One important point to note is that “[t]he ‘seeds of the Gospel’ were carried across the globe by emigrants, soldiers and merchants who had converted during Methodist services in England and continued to preach the Wesleyan ethos when they landed in other countries.”¹⁶

The Methodist church became a missionary church that started mission stations in various parts of the world, such as southern Africa, the West Indies, New Zealand, and North America. In 1799, the London Missionary Society was busy with efforts to start a mission station in the Cape Colony. What was distinctive about Wesleyan missionaries was their approach: it included both missionary and philanthropic endeavours. In 1806, the Cape officially became a British colony, which led to the arrival of British soldiers. Methodism soon followed and “would grow to become the most dominant faith perspective in present-day South Africa.”¹⁷ In the early days of Methodism, it was emphasised that “all men being equal sinners before Christ, little if any distinction was made between race and culture on spiritual grounds” (sentiments shared by other Methodist scholars such as Dion Forster, Simangaliso Kumalo, as well as Madise and Taunyane.¹⁸ Yet, Kumalo laments that in the Methodist historical records credit is given mainly to the white missionaries, and not much about the contributions of the indigenous African missionaries.¹⁹

Eurocentric Tendencies among Methodist Missionaries

As much as Methodism was an interracial enterprise, Nel notes that “Methodist missionaries might well have viewed all humans as spiritual equals, but not as equals in culture, traditions, and values.”²⁰ Nel further notes that the missionaries viewed the indigenous people’s way of life as primitive, unsophisticated, backward, lowly, and barbaric. She calls this view “European-centred ethnocentrism.” She furthermore states that Methodist missionaries were not saintly human beings, and they looked at the inhabitants of the Cape Colony with “prejudicial assumptions.”²¹ The natives were seen by missionaries as upliftment projects. In referring to the diaries of the missionaries, Nel notes that the terms “heathen,” “savage,” and “barbaric” were common, and served to elevate the Europeans to a platform “superior” to the natives.²²

¹⁵ Christine Margaret Pocock, “The Origins, Development and Significance of the Circuit in Wesleyan and Primitive Methodism in England 1740-1914” (University of Nottingham, 2015), 43.

¹⁶ Pocock, “The Origins, Development and Significance of the Circuit in Wesleyan and Primitive Methodism in England 1740-1914.”

¹⁷ Annemieke B. Nel, “South African Missions, Methodism, Identity and Agency in the Cape, with Reference to the Klipfontein Mission Station, ca. 1800s-2010s” (Stellenbosch University, 2020),31.

¹⁸ Dion Forster, “Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa’s Mission,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 34, no. 1 (2008): 411–34; Madise and Taunyane, *The Methodist Church in Africa, 1933-2001*, 5.

¹⁹ Smangaliso R. Kumalo, “Methodism in South Africa: The Teaching Ministry of Five Native Mission Agents,,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXII (2006): 5.

²⁰ Nel, “South African Missions, Methodism, Identity and Agency in the Cape, with Reference to the Klipfontein Mission Station, ca. 1800s-2010s,”39.

²¹ Nel, “South African Missions, Methodism, Identity and Agency in the Cape, with Reference to the Klipfontein Mission Station, ca. 1800s-2010s,” 13, 14, 15.

²² Nel, “South African Missions, Methodism, Identity and Agency in the Cape, with Reference to the Klipfontein Mission Station, ca. 1800s-2010s,” 15.

Forster also notes that some of the Methodist missionary work was Western-oriented, and even blatantly colonial, a claim Kumalo also affirms.²³ Kumalo mentions a mission fund founded in Natal called *Unzondelelo* (a Zulu word meaning “endurance”). The *Unzondelelo* fund was set up in 1875 to acquire more native mission agents, who were not receiving any financial aid from the Methodist Church. For natives not to receive financial aid from the Church is a clear indication that as persons their wellbeing was not taken into consideration or viewed as equal to their counterparts. Kumalo adds that, for the native Methodists, the *Unzondelelo* fund was the natives' means of self-reliance and a reflection of the passion and commitment they had towards the growth of the mission work. Kumalo states, “This caused embarrassment to the Methodist church because it meant that missionary work and its funding were based on racial grounds.”²⁴ An excuse that was given by the church at the time was that the natives who preached were not well-educated and could not qualify for ordination.

Secondly, Kumalo asserts that missionaries were reluctant to ordain the natives: they did not want to “lose control of the church to indigenous clergy.” One can point out that power dynamics were at play here, a fear of losing power to the inferior natives. After several deliberations on the *Unzondelelo* fund, missionaries ended up appointing Rev. John Kilner in 1880, who, at the time the general secretary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society. It should be noted that, sadly the reluctance of the Methodist missionaries to recognise the gifts of the indigenous people led to breakaways within the Methodist Church. Kumalo estimates that there are about 3000 African Independent/Indigenous churches, most of which originally broke away from the Methodist Church. Kumalo, citing Rev Andrew Losaba, states that, “in the majority of cases the African Independent churches have been the work of black Methodist ministers and lay leaders who learned leadership skills as members of the Methodist Church.”²⁵ Madise and Taunyane further argue that as Methodist missionaries ministered to the indigenous people, God turned their hearts to Christ.

The establishment of the Methodist Church by the Wesleyan missionaries among the indigenous people however did not take into cognisance the interests, cultural, social, economic, and political backgrounds of the indigenous people. Consequently, this led to the Methodist Church’s first schism, which was led by Nehemiah Tile, who resigned from the Church to form a Thembu National Church. A second split was led by Mangena Mokone, who was critical of the inequality that could be seen in black people not occupying any positions of influence, the unequal stipends, the separate synods with white chairmen presiding over both white and black synods, and unfair conditions of employment for black ministers. Mangena Mokone, after continuously seeing that these matters were not being resolved, resigned from the Methodist Church and formed the Ethiopian Church. Another factor that led to the split in the Church was the domination of white people in decisions of the Church. Madise and Taunyane state that, “it became apparent that the law in the church was made by the white people and their word was final, irrespective of whether it was right or wrong.”²⁶

Methodist Independence

The British Conference’s authority and allegiance are considered to have ended in 1926 when the South African Conference made this decision.²⁷ According to Madise and Taunyane, The Methodist Church at the time was divided, with the Orange Free State and Cape Colony districts both referring to themselves as the Methodist Church.²⁸ Additionally, the Transvaal district was under the jurisdiction of the Methodist Church of England Conference. However, the Methodist movement in South Africa was united in 1932.²⁹

²³ Forster, “Revival, Revolution and Reform in Global Methodism,” 25.

²⁴ Kumalo, “Methodism in South Africa,” 6-8.

²⁵ Kumalo, “Methodism in South Africa,” 8-10.

²⁶ Mokhele and Taunyane, *The Methodist Church in Africa*, (Research institute for Theology and Religion, 2012),7.

²⁷ Methodist Church of Southern Africa, *The Methodist Book of Order: The Laws and Discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa*, 23.

²⁸ Madise and Taunyane, *The Methodist Church in Africa, 1933-2001*, 11.

²⁹ Methodist Church of Southern Africa, *The Methodist Book of Order: The Laws and Discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa*, 23.

The Methodist Church Readjusting Itself as an African Church

After the independence of the MCSA became a reality, it was faced with the challenge of repositioning itself within the southern African context, as well as living out its core beliefs, which, among others, was its doctrine of social holiness. The social and political landscape in which the Methodist Church found itself in South Africa was influenced by legislation such as the Group Areas Act of 1950, which separated South Africans along racial lines. To illustrate how seriously the MCSA took its role of readjusting to being an African church, Forster posits that Methodism in South Africa contributed immensely to transformation during the time of pain due to the apartheid policies of the day. He states:

[T]he context of Southern African history, particularly, the experiences of colonialism and apartheid, as well as the social identities of the predominantly Black South African membership, have been the soil and nutrients in which it grew and flourished, leading to unique African appropriations of Wesley.³⁰

“One and undivided”

It was the Group Areas Act No. 41 of 1950 that led the MCSA to push back against a system that was aimed at separating God’s people according to race. Alan Mabin points out that this Act evolved from many others that had racial segregation at their core, such as the Areas Reservation and Immigration and Registration Act of 1925, which was introduced by Minister D.F. Malan.³¹ Leleki argues that similar to other churches, the MCSA was forced to react to the apartheid regime, which put it in a difficult situation. As noted, the early work of Methodism was multiracial, and the Group Areas Act at the time tampered with this important Methodist identity.³² It is for this reason that Forster says that the 1958 MCSA statement established the framework for the church’s practical application of its social holiness theology.³³ Despite the laws of the time, the MCSA took a monumental stand that it would remain “one and undivided.”³⁴

Obedience 81

The MCSA led marches against the harsh state in the 1970s—a time of violence and tyranny—alongside other ecumenical allies.³⁵ The Methodist Church, its clergy and laity, took part in issuing statements condemning the violence, the oppressive tendencies, and the abuses of the state that led to many Methodists being banned, persecuted, and prosecuted due to their stance against the apartheid government.³⁶ The MCSA’s Obedience 81 statement demonstrated its understanding of itself as a church that existed to spread scriptural holiness as one and undivided, despite the Group Areas Act in place at the time.³⁷ The message of the Obedience 81 Conference aimed at fostering unity within the Methodist Church.

Journey to the New Land

Under the direction of Presiding Bishop Mvume Dandala, the MCSA approved the establishment of a church-initiated peace force in 1992 with the goal of keeping an eye on and putting an end to the widespread violence at the time.³⁸ During the MCSA Conference in 1993, the church engaged in what they called the “Journey to the New Land,” where, intentionally, “[l]istening was a feature of this convocation, as we sought to hear God’s Word and the cry of the community. We listened as Methodists spoke of their pain and their dreams.”³⁹ Among other issues that came out of this conversation were:

³⁰ Forster, “Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa’s Mission,” 1, 5, 23.

³¹ Alan Mabin, “Comprehensive Segregation: The Origins of the Group Areas Act and Its Planning Apparatuses,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992): 405–29.

³² Leleki, *The Methodist Church and Society in Transvaal*, 12.

³³ Forster, “Prophetic Witness and Social Action,” 9.

³⁴ Methodist Church of Southern Africa, *Yearbook*, 9.

³⁵ Forster, “Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa’s Mission,” 13.

³⁶ Forster, “Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa’s Mission,” 13.

³⁷ Forster, “Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa’s Mission,” 14.

³⁸ Methodist Church of Southern Africa, *Yearbook*, 7.

³⁹ Methodist Church of Southern Africa, *Yearbook*, 36.

- The call to be a priesthood of all believers.
- A growth in spirituality, evidenced by contextual worship and lifestyle.
- A return to the values of Ubuntu, family life, and servant mission.⁴⁰

This led to a discussion around issues such as personal piety and social holiness (i.e., the values of Ubuntu, family life, and servant mission, mentioned above).⁴¹ The MCSA understood God's calling to move from the maintenance approach to being an active participant in God's mission through the transformation of southern African society. This 1992 conference encouraged clergy persons to be visible, for example by earmarking a day in a week to assist in counselling victims of violence and abuse, monitoring the work of the police, visiting prisoners, and so forth.

The MCSA post-1994

Nevertheless, the MCSA had to reposition itself in the new dispensation and the political climate at the time in South Africa. It was in 2004, during the leadership of the Presiding Bishop Rev. Ivan Abrahams, that the so-called "Mission Congress" was initiated. This took place ten years after democracy in South Africa to respond to challenges such as the high rate of HIV/AIDS infections, the slow pace of service delivery, and the new government.⁴² It was at the 2005 Conference that the MCSA agreed to take the following route:

- To be a mission-conscious Church shaped by the imperatives of spirituality, evangelism and church growth, justice and service, and development and economic empowerment.
- To strive for the liberation of the laity, to be facilitated by the clergy, that will enable their full participation in the life and witness of the church.
- The revamping of its structures to serve our vision, mission thrust, and transformation strategies.
- The eradication of racism, prejudice and inequality in institutional life.
- Taking seriously the call to a healing ministry, especially in our response to the HIV/Aids pandemic.
- A clear understanding of Church/State relations within the socio-political realities of our time, and the jealous guarding of the duty to be ready to speak with a prophetic voice when necessary.⁴³

Theological Framing: Decoloniality

Ndlovu-Gatsheni cites Anibal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres when defining coloniality as being;

. . . different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such a nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of people, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects, we breathe coloniality all the time and every day.⁴⁴

Similarly, Bekithemba Dube maintains that "coloniality refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations."⁴⁵ Coloniality survives colonialism. Ndlovu-Gatsheni asserts that the coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge,

⁴⁰ Forster, "Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's Mission,"16.

⁴¹ Forster, "Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's Mission," 16.

⁴² Forster, "Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's Mission,"17.

⁴³ Forster, "Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's Mission,"18.

⁴⁴ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa,"487.

⁴⁵ Bekithemba Dube, "'Go and Prophesy in Your Own Land': Foreign Prophets and Popularism in South Africa. Evoking the Need of Jonathanic Theology for Peaceful Resolution of Difference," *Religions* 11, no. 1 (2020): 42.

and coloniality of being are the three principles that form the foundation of decoloniality. Examining how global political power has been organized, constructed, and set up into a patriarchal, capitalist, heteronormative, asymmetrical, racially hierarchical, Christian-centric, and Euro-American power structure is made easier by the concept of coloniality of power.⁴⁶

Furthermore, Ndlovu-Gatsheni submits that “coloniality of power is a concept that decolonial theorists use to analyse modern global cartography of power and how the modern world works.” The second concept focuses on “teasing out epistemological issues, politics of knowledge generation, as well as questions of who generates which knowledge and for what purpose.” Coloniality of knowledge therefore assists in understanding how endogenous and indigenous knowledge have been understood and pushed to the periphery of the world knowledge system.⁴⁷ It is for this reason that Ngugi wa Thiong’o argues that “the most important area of domination regarding colonialism was the domination of the mind and imagination.”⁴⁸ Johannes Seroto submits that coloniality of knowledge attempts to compel colonial scholars with an understanding of how and why other knowledge systems were pushed to the periphery of society. Seroto further argues that missionaries also used this colonisation of knowledge to promote Eurocentric knowledge.⁴⁹ Seroto’s point is what this article is attempting to point out; as much as the missionaries’ work was admirable, there were also underlying, and unintended consequences that impacted their converts negatively. Amongst these consequences were that missionaries consciously and unconsciously perceived the indigenous people as inadequate beings who deserved development and civilisation using Western knowledge systems.⁵⁰ Ndlovu-Gatsheni summarises this in the following manner: “Decoloniality pushes for transcendence over narrow conceptions of being decolonised and consistently gestures towards liberation from coloniality as a complex matrix of knowledge, power and being.”⁵¹ Claude Ake and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, respectively, observe that the coloniality of knowledge poses epistemological questions that are linked to the following four points:

1. The politics of knowledge production.
2. The question of who generates which knowledge and for what purpose.
3. The question of the relevance and irrelevance of knowledge.
4. Ways in which knowledge disempowers or empowers communities and peoples.⁵²

The coloniality of being is the third idea in decoloniality. The coloniality of being raises important considerations about ontology in relation to humans. The goal of coloniality of being is to oppose the global commodification and dehumanization of Black people. It is an effort to reclaim lost subjecthood, eventually become a citizen, and find answers to other existential and humanist concerns. Additionally, Ndlovu-Gatsheni asserts that the study of coloniality “helps us to investigate how humanity was portrayed for indigenous people, which subsequently led to the ‘objectification’/‘thingification’/‘commodification’ of these people.”⁵³ The coloniality of being and knowing are the main topics of this essay.

METHODOLOGY

The article employed a systematic review of literature as its research methodology. Ebidor and Ikhide define this methodology as “critically analysing published sources on a particular subject matter which involves an in-depth examination of academic texts, scholarly articles, and other relevant materials to

⁴⁶ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa,” 489.

⁴⁷ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa,” 490.

⁴⁸ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), 16.

⁴⁹ Johannes Seroto, “Dynamics of Decoloniality in South Africa: A Critique of the History of Swiss Mission Education for Indigenous People,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 44, no. 3 (2018): 4-5.

⁵⁰ Seroto, “Dynamics of Decoloniality in South Africa: A Critique of the History of Swiss Mission Education for Indigenous People,” 5.

⁵¹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa,” 490.

⁵² Claude Ake, *Social Science as Imperialism: The Theory of Political Development, (No Title)* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1982), 5; Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 18.

⁵³ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity*, 18.

gain knowledge and a deep understanding of a specific topic.”⁵⁴ This methodology was found to be relevant for this study because it enabled the researcher to examine the validity of the research question through in-depth analysis and synthesis of existing literature and studies on the research topic.⁵⁵

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Is the MCSA an African Church?

Simangaliso Kumalo made this statement about the MCSA: “This raises the question of how an institution like the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, which is also a product of colonisation, can be celebrated after two centuries of existence and work in the African context.”⁵⁶ This is a question this paper attempts to address. The journey that the MCSA has undergone to position itself within the Southern African context has been highlighted in detail. Methodist scholars such as Foster argue that the MCSA is an African Church and refers to the significant contribution of organisations within the church, such as the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC). He notes: “The BMC has significantly helped the MCSA to reinvent itself as an African Christian denomination through education, publication, and the presentation of the value and necessity of Black and African theologies.”⁵⁷ Mtshiselwa further submits that black people in the MCSA employ idioms when preaching, which expresses their spirituality.⁵⁸ Another aspect to note, which adds to Mtshiselwa’s argument, is that of African rhythm during worship with the use of drums. Kumalo, who is a Methodist clergyman and theologian agrees about the African-ness of the MCSA:

The MCSA is no longer an English or a foreign church but an African one. This is confirmed by the form of worship, music, liturgy, drums, uniforms, et cetera. All these demonstrate the success of the work of the mission agents in struggling to appropriate the gospel and Methodism for their people. As a result, even though they are dead, they still speak to us through their faith and resilience.⁵⁹

Kumalo goes on to elaborate on his point that the MCSA is an African church:

[W]e remain as the Methodist Church not just as a western religion but rather also an African religion with western influences or sinews. In many ways this church was planted by European missionaries, most of them from England, yet it has adapted to the African soil in such a way that it is no longer an English church but an African one.⁶⁰

Having reviewed all these papers, this article posits that the MCSA is not fully an African church, notwithstanding the critical role it has played in the education, political, and socioeconomic system in southern Africa. However, the African ontology and epistemologies which are critical aspects that shape the African worldview are yet to be embraced and taken into account when it comes to doctrinal matters in the MCSA. Kumalo, however, is also quite critical when he posits that “churches, especially mainline churches such as the Methodist Church, are known as consumers of knowledge from the West without exporting any intellectual resources to be consumed by those in other continents.”⁶¹ Williams and Bentley give an example to support Kumalo’s argument when saying the MCSA still has some practices—such as ordination, vestments, and its understanding of a calling to ministry—which need decolonisation.⁶²

⁵⁴ Lawani-Luwaji Ebidor and Ilegbedion Godwin Ikhide, “Literature Review in Scientific Research: An Overview,” *East African Journal of Education Studies* 7, no. 2 (2024): 211.

⁵⁵ Ebidor and Ikhide, “Literature Review in Scientific Research: An Overview,” 211.

⁵⁶ Smangaliso R. Kumalo, *African Legends of Methodism: Life Stories of Some Leaders Formed by the Methodist Church in Southern Africa*, 1st ed. (Pietermaritzburg: Bibliotos Publishers (PTY) Ltd., 2020), 14.

⁵⁷ Forster, “Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa’s Mission,” 18.

⁵⁸ Ndikho Mtshiselwa, “Two Hundred Years of Methodism! A Black Theological Inquiry into the Heritage of Methodism in Southern Africa 1816-2016,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 42, no. 3 (2016): 103.

⁵⁹ Kumalo, “Methodism in South Africa: The Teaching Ministry of Five Native Mission Agents,” 11.

⁶⁰ Kumalo, *African Legends of Methodism: Life Stories of Some Leaders Formed by the Methodist Church in Southern Africa*, 12.

⁶¹ Simangaliso Raymond Kumalo, “Reverend Linda Mandindi and the Quest for Black Methodist Consultation: Muted Voices Are Enabled to Speak,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 44, no. 3 (2018): 2.

⁶² Donald M Williams and Wessel Bentley, “The Need for Continued Decolonisation and Africanisation of Ordination in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa,” *Theologia Viatorum* 44, no. 1 (2020): 1.

To elaborate on this point, Williams and Bentley argued that the ordination within the MCSA remains British and colonial, and there seems to be nothing African about it. They also contend that the teaching and practices of the ordination ceremony are still mostly English. They postulate that “[s]ignificant aspects of African culture and spirituality are not sufficiently incorporated into or evident in our present theology and practices.”⁶³ It is interesting that Williams and Bentley raise this argument, although vernacular hymns and prayers are incorporated in this liturgy of ordination. A point they are making is that, irrespective of the vernacular hymns and prayers in the ordination liturgy, these are merely translations and do not necessarily express anything African. They further observe that “During the ordination service, there is little of the dress code of African people and their cultures in evidence either on the stage or in the congregation.”⁶⁴ Williams and Bentley go as far as to cite the former Bishop of Limpopo District, the Rev. Themba Mntambo (inducted on 23 November 2018), who said, “If I had to conduct our ordination service in London, would the people ask: What do they mean by that? Why is that in there? I don’t think they will because it is a straightforward English [Western] service.”⁶⁵

Furthermore, Williams and Bentley speak about the MCSA’s understanding of a call to ministry where African candidates fear being truthful about their call, as in some instances, the call entails things such as visions and dreams, which are not aligned with what the MCSA believes to be a call to ministry should entail.⁶⁶ This is despite countless Scripture passages where God spoke and called various people through dreams and visions, such as Jacob, Samuel, Paul, and Peter.⁶⁷ The former Presiding Bishop of the MCSA, who is currently the General Secretary of the World Methodist Council, stated “We have black candidates for the ministry talking about dreams and being called, but they stop short in saying this is the ancestors speaking to them. They dress it up in more respectable language.”⁶⁸

Elaborating more on this point, the study now focuses on a growing concern about how black African Methodists understand death. While serving as a resident minister in Mamelodi, Tshwane Metro in Gauteng province, Mokhutso observed that, although the family of the deceased may seek the Methodist Church in Mamelodi, Pretoria, South Africa, for support throughout their grieving process, the families frequently also need African customs for bereavement.⁶⁹ Some families choose to do this in addition to the church's customs surrounding bereavement. For example, a clergyman may lead the body from the hearse, church, or home of the bereaved person while reciting passages from the Bible, particularly those that discuss the Resurrection and the promise of eternal life. As the deceased's body is being transported to the church or cemetery, other relatives may insist that family or clan adulations be said, or a designated family member may speak to the dead.

This raises a question: Are the bereavement rituals offered by the Methodist Church sufficient for its members? Surely, if the rituals offered by the church were sufficient, its members would be content with what the Methodist Church does for them during their sad time of bereavement. In this research, Mokhutso found various responses in relation to the dual practices of Christianity and African traditional bereavement rituals. He poses a question reflecting this phenomenon: “Are the Methodist Church’s bereavement rituals conducted during bereavement insufficient? Does this phenomenon

⁶³ Williams and Bentley, “The Need for Continued Decolonisation and Africanisation of Ordination in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa,”1.

⁶⁴ Williams and Bentley, “The Need for Continued Decolonisation and Africanisation of Ordination in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa,”1, 3,4.

⁶⁵ Williams and Bentley, “The Need for Continued Decolonisation and Africanisation of Ordination in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa,”4.

⁶⁶ Williams and Bentley, “The Need for Continued Decolonisation and Africanisation of Ordination in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa,”3.

⁶⁷ Genesis 46:2 “And God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, “Jacob! Jacob!” (New International version);1 Samuel 3: 1 – 18 “...Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord...Then the Lord called Samuel” (New International version); Acts 16: 9 “During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia...come over to Macedonia and help us.” (New International version);Acts 10:9 – 23 “...Peter went up to the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance...then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” (New International version).

⁶⁸ Ivan M. Abrahams, “Personal communication” (16 October 2022).

⁶⁹ Jacob Mokhutso, “Are Methodist Church Bereavement Ritual’s Sufficient for Its Black African Members?: A Qualitative Analysis of a Church in Mamelodi, South Africa.,” *Pharos Journal of Theology* 102 (2021), 2.

mean that what the Methodist Church offers its members is inadequate/lacking to offer healing and comfort to the bereaved families during their time of grief?" Having raised these thoughts, the following part of this article highlights important findings which will elaborate further on the argument this paper is making. The first group of participants in the research project conducted by Mokhutso said that the bereavement rituals the Church offered to them were adequate: however, they fell short of addressing their 'African-ness.'⁷⁰

Their African-ness refers to issues such as *sefifi* or "being in a state of impurity," which needs cleansing due to death. Z.M. Tshoba elaborates on what *sefifi* is: "[I]n traditional African societies, when a family member has died, the family of the deceased is regarded as soiled or polluted by contact with the dead."⁷¹ Again, issues such as the mourning period, cleansing, ancestors, etc., are raised.⁷² The responses of these participants led Mokhutso to conclude that "[t]his kind of research expresses that Christianity cannot respond to the care or needs of Africans by way of its Western-based pastoral care systems, whose challenges are at times not based on African epistemologies, such as witchcraft."⁷³

A second view from the participants Mokhutso interviewed, and which is a significant point for this article, is that participants said that practising the Christian and African bereavement rituals reflected what they termed their 'African-ness' or identity as African people.⁷⁴ Mokhutso concludes: "African traditional religion is a reality in many African peoples' lives, irrespective of other religious affiliations. The mainline or former missionary churches generally tend to ignore this reality, thus creating confusion among its members because of a lack of a point of reference from the church."⁷⁵

DISCUSSION

The MCSA is not an African Church

After examining and analyzing the information that is currently available regarding the MCSA's past, this article makes the case that the organization is not an African church. It contends that the MCSA's membership list, use of drums, wearing of uniforms, possession of property in Africa, and use of African idioms in sermons are not sufficient reasons to declare the organization to be an African church. If African ontologies and epistemologies are still disregarded, the MCSA cannot be considered African. Why, if the MCSA is an African church, do black African members still feel uneasy being completely authentic when it comes to death-related issues or in terms of how they perceive God speaking to them through their descendants? Why is the Methodist Book of Order (MBO) still, to this day, noticeably quiet about African epistemological issues on issues such as death, marriage, rituals, etc.? Furthermore, since the independence of the MCSA from the British Methodist Church, the MBO remains available only in the British language (English) and not in any of the African languages spoken in southern Africa, making it difficult to access and understand by many African Methodists, who are unfamiliar with the British (English) language. Again, the reality is that all languages highlight the fact that languages are not empty vessels but carry with them the culture of various contexts in which they are spoken.

The silence of the MCSA Book of Order in addressing these issues is the greatest sign that the MCSA still has a long way to go in this regard. Strangely enough, it is only now that the MCSA is in conversation about *ukuthwasa*, or traditional healers' initiation or training. One wonders, why has it taken the MCSA so long to have this conversation. What has been happening to other Methodists who have undergone this training? Perhaps it is for this reason that Kumalo says, "Ultimately we will move from being consumers of other people's knowledge to also being disseminators of our own knowledge to the rest of the world; thus, making us not just objects of the production of knowledge but rather the subjects and producers of new and liberating knowledge."⁷⁶ Williams and Bentley state,

⁷⁰ Mokhutso, "Are Methodist Church Bereavement Ritual's Sufficient for Its Black African Members?: A Qualitative Analysis of a Church in Mamelodi, South Africa," 1.

⁷¹ Zanele M. Tshoba, "The Psychological Significance of Shaving Hair as a Ritual During Mourning within the Ndebele Culture" (University of South Africa, 2014), 2.

⁷² Tshoba, "The Psychological Significance of Shaving Hair as a Ritual During Mourning within the Ndebele Culture," 2.

⁷³ Tshoba, "The Psychological Significance of Shaving Hair as a Ritual During Mourning within the Ndebele Culture," 7.

⁷⁴ Tshoba, "The Psychological Significance of Shaving Hair as a Ritual During Mourning within the Ndebele Culture," 6.

⁷⁵ Tshoba, "The Psychological Significance of Shaving Hair as a Ritual During Mourning within the Ndebele Culture," 7.

⁷⁶ Kumalo, "Reverend Linda Mandindi and the Quest for Black Methodist Consultation: Muted Voices Are Enabled to Speak," 2.

The decolonisation of the MCSA and the stripping of the systemic issues arising from colonialism must extend to the Africanisation of the MCSA. This shift must include the adoption and inculcation of an African epistemology to inform the very being and practices of the church and permeate the ecclesiology and doctrine of ordination. Is such a process permissible in the MCSA?⁷⁷

Forster cites Rev. Ross Olivier, who says that Methodism in Southern Africa is like a potted plant. Olivier says missionaries brought the Gospel and “it was in the form of a potted plant,”; he suggests that it is “your task [as Africans] to remove it from the constraints of the pot and plant it in your African soil so that it would be nurtured by Africans nutrients.”⁷⁸ The theoretical framework that couches this paper highlights among other things a need as shared by Ndlovu-Gatsheni for decoloniality, which is a shift of the “geography and biography of knowledge” to the indigenous people who have the potential and knowledge to address their own vulnerabilities.⁷⁹ It is apparent that black African members within the MCSA find their being not fully embraced, and not yet able to be fully African while also being Methodists embracing their African epistemologies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to deal with the critical issues raised in this, a dialogue is recommended within the MCSA about Christianity and African traditional religion.⁸⁰ The article recommends the following having explored in-depth analysed available literature exploring the question of whether the MCSA is an African Church or a British Church in Africa.

The MCSA should acknowledge that it is an African Church, and this is visible with the majority of its membership being Black Africans. This should be demonstrated by using the local African languages not only in worship services, and the proclamation of the Word of God, but also in its constitution (MBO), and conference documents (Yearbook). Shava and Manyike posit that “Indigenous languages capture and transmit the knowledge and wisdom of indigenous communities through stories, proverbs, folktales, myths, poetry and songs that convey meanings about individuals, society, culture and nature interactions.”⁸¹ This means language is not only something used to communicate, but it embodies the identity, wisdom, and culture of those who speak it. Therefore, using African languages speaks not only to the ear, but also to the heart of Africans.

The Church should contextualise its theology and practices with regard to issues such as the understanding of marriage, death, and tombstones to its Black African membership. The MBO is sadly silent on this matter thereby opening room to many usages that have not been tested as to whether they are compliant with the MCSA theology. The silence of the MBO on these issues brings confusion as well as opens doors to various practices that are contrary to the MCSA’s teachings and doctrines. Again, this paper has acknowledged already, and commended the MCSA for taking a lead by openly having a conversation about *Ukuthwasa*, there are many other issues that need attention from the Church.

CONCLUSION

The study has explored whether the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) is an African Church or a British Church operating in Africa. The findings have revealed that the activities of the MCSA even though having African elements, cannot be fully classified as an African church. It has been recommended that the MCSA should acknowledge that it is an African Church, and thus, it should visibly identify with the majority of its membership being Black Africans. The MCSA should have a serious time of reflection regarding whether it is an African church or not, and this article has attempted to highlight some of the matters that should be taken into consideration. The MCSA has played a huge

⁷⁷ Williams and Bentley, “The Need for Continued Decolonisation and Africanisation of Ordination in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa,” 2.

⁷⁸ Forster, “Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa’s Mission,” 8.

⁷⁹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity*, 4.

⁸⁰ Jacob Mokhutso, “Exploring the Tension between Christianity and African Traditional Religion in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 49, no. 3 (2023): 17.

⁸¹ Tintswalo V Manyike and Soul Shava, “The Decolonial Role of African Indigenous Languages and Indigenous Knowledges in Formal Education Processes,” *Indilinga African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems* 17, no. 1 (2018): 37.

role in confronting the educational, political, and socioeconomic issues facing southern Africa head-on. However, this paper has argued that the African epistemologies have not been given the same attention in their polity and doctrines. Black African Methodists still have struggles with which the church cannot assist, such as ancestral calling, cultural rituals, death, and marriage as understood and practiced by black Africans. It is quite clear that black African Methodists find themselves struggling with their Christianity and African epistemologies. If the MCSA wants to fully be an African church, it cannot ignore these matters any longer especially when looking at the vision of the MCSA which states, “A Christ-healed Africa for the healing of nations.” It is the submission of this paper that healing should start with the MCSA speaking an African language and identifying with the indigenous people.

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