

Exploring the Tension between Christianity and African Traditional Religion in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa

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Abstract

In the 19th century, missionaries from England brought Methodism to Southern Africa. Like all other missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa, they brought not only the Gospel, but also their culture and language. This article seeks to acknowledge the strides made by the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) regarding implanting Methodism in African soil. Thus, the article further explores the tension that persists in the MCSA between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR). It argues that this tension opens opportunities for the MCSA to explore. The article uses secondary or desk research as a methodology to investigate this topic. The research showed that there is a tension that exists between Christianity and ATR, which affords the MCSA an opportunity to explore what it means to be African and Methodist in the MCSA; to dissect the causes of this tension; and to interrogate these causes for what it means for the MCSA. The article concludes that the tension under study has resulted from the MCSA taking its time to put its resolutions in black and white in the form of liturgy, policy, or guidelines. Thus, a recommendation is made for more dialogue and openness concerning areas where the MCSA could venture towards achieving its vision of “A Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of Nations”. Finally, the article argues that in order to heal Africa, the book of order and the Gospel preached in the MCSA should speak and make sense to Methodists of African descent.

Keywords: exploration; tension; Christian ethos; African Traditional Religion; Methodist Church of Southern Africa

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Historical Background of the MCSA in Southern Africa

Firstly, Methodism in South Africa or Southern Africa originated from England in the 19th century. Madise and Taunyane (2012, 1) aver that two crucial factors must be considered, in order to understand the historical background of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). Secondly, numerous denominations in Southern Africa identify themselves as Methodists, due to the historical factors resulting from the divisions within the Methodist Church in the 19th and 20th centuries. This article focuses solely on the MCSA in Southern Africa, including countries such as Mozambique, Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana and Namibia (Bentley 2014, 4). Methodism traces its origins to the ministry of two brothers, John and Charles Wesley (Madise and Taunyane 2012, 5). The initial aim of Methodism was not to establish a church, but to bring revival within the Anglican Church, in which John and Charles were ordained priests (Madise and Taunyane 2012, 5). In the 18th century, when Methodism was born and the Anglican Church viewed its radicalism with suspicion, the Wesley brothers and their friend, George Whitefield, brought about a revival at a time when England was a troubled society, due to industrialisation (Madise and Taunyane 2012, 5). According to Bond (2008, 56), Whitefield was an ecumenist; he was not afraid of communing with every believer who loved Christ:

He had close relationships with members of various denominations and made it a practice to associate with men and women of all stations in life, preaching to groups as diverse as the Kingswood colliers (miners) and the very poor, as well as to the highest members of British aristocracy.

For this reason, Whitefield contributed to the earlier days of Methodism: “Whitefield is best known for his part in the development of early Methodism. He continued to work closely with Methodists throughout his ministry” (Bond 2008, 60). Elaborating on how troubled England was at the time, Mujinga (2017, 1–2) mentions that the British industrial revolution was both social and theological. The social aspect was the fact that before the industrial revolution, people depended on good weather, good crops, farming, and nature. The dawn of the industrial revolution introduced trade organisations, and modern credit facilities such as a state bank. This led to urbanisation when people started to crowd the cities. Capitalism became dominant in the English society. There was also a rise in child labour, causing children to be abused physically in factories. Infant mortality rose to 50%; children died before celebrating their second birthday (Mujinga 2017, 2). Social conditions worsened, due to overpopulation, which led to the growth of slums and unsafe living conditions.

Theologically, as people moved to the cities for better economic opportunities, the rural church suffered, as fewer people attended church. Due to the nature of industrialisation and capitalism, this meant that people worked longer hours and more days, preventing them from attending church. According to Mujinga (2017, 2), “the emphasis at the time was on gold not God”, and in the process, the church lost contact with the people. According to Mujinga (2017, 2), it seems that the Anglican Church, at the time, was

simply watching all these changes happening; it stopped ministering to its new context. The context of the Anglican Church, at the time, is well documented:

The Church of England was failing in its evangelical mandate because of several factors, including the influence of the philosophy of Deism, its latitudinarianism, its fear of emotionalism, and its unwillingness to reach the unchurched masses. The problems of the Anglican Church of Whitefield's day dated to the 1660s when the monarchy was restored after the Puritan Revolution under Oliver Cromwell. (Bond 2008, 21)

Methodism was brought to Southern Africa from as early as 1799, before the Methodist Missionary Society had been established. It was only established between the years 1813 and 1818 (Madise and Taunyane 2012, 6). Mujinga (2017, 109) argues that there is evidence of other Methodists who arrived between 1795 and 1802 from different regiments of British armies. However, Forster (2008, 4, citing Balia 1991, 14) mentions that the first known Methodist to have arrived in Southern Africa was a soldier of the 72nd regiment of the British army, George Middlemiss, who was stationed at the Cape of Good Hope in 1805. It is said that Middlemiss gathered a group of Methodists in the Cape, and the fruits of that gathering resulted in a church being established. Forster (2008, 4) also mentions that in 1812, at the time of the arrival of Sergeant Kendrick, a class leader and Methodist lay preacher, this small group had risen to 142 members.

As Methodism grew, the Methodist Missionary Society sent Reverend Barnabas Shaw, an ordained Methodist minister, to spread Methodism in Southern Africa and form various mission stations. This work was further expanded by Reverend William Shaw (not related to Barnabas Shaw), who evangelised the black African people (Madise and Taunyane 2012, 6). To explain the growth of Methodism at the time, Forster (2008, 4) argues that by the year 1860, there were approximately 132 Methodist ministers and missionaries in the then Eastern Cape and Natal. This historical background is helpful to give context to the topic under study. The context in question is that Methodism was brought to Southern Africa by Europeans, whose mission was to bring a Western-packaged Methodism as they knew it. The missionaries in question were raised, trained and lived in Britain before their work in Africa. For this reason, Forster (2008, 4) mentions that "missionaries were dispatched from England to establish and spread Methodist work throughout the subcontinent". It can, therefore, be argued that the interest of Methodist missionaries was never to understand African Traditional Religion (ATR); instead, their focus was to spread Methodism as far and wide as they could.

Background of the Tension between Christianity and ATR

Despite the successful work of the Methodist Missionary Society (lay people such as Sergeant John Kendrick and other clergy such as Reverends Barnabas Shaw and William Shaw, among others), Williams and Bentley (2020, 1) highlight the fact that the work of the early Methodist missionaries carried a deeply colonial world view. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019, 2) elaborates that, at the root of colonialism, was the intention to destroy other civilisations rather than blending different worlds. The colonial

undertone of early Methodism can best be understood on account of the fact that these missionaries were trained and ordained ministers who were accountable to the Wesleyan Methodist Church in England for their discipline, conduct, doctrine and stationing (or placement), even though they operated in Africa (Williams and Bentley 2020, 1). Forster (2008, 5) mentions that, despite the excellent work done by Methodists at the time, their attempt to foster social transformation and development had a decidedly Western, and even blatantly colonial, slant to it. For this reason, “the establishment of the Methodist Church by the Wesleyan missionaries among the indigenous people did not consider their interests, politics, social, economic and cultural background”, according to Madise and Taunyane (2012, 6). Kumalo (2018, 4) writes:

When the Methodists landed in South Africa, it was [a] Eurocentric denomination like other English-speaking churches. It was dominated by white culture, theology and polity. Although most of its mission agents sought to adapt it to the African context and its dynamics, it was trapped in colonial vestiges and legacies for a long time.

Forster (2008, 5), citing Hofmeyer and Pillay (1991, 253), as well as De Gruchy and De Gruchy (2004, 14), mention that the MCSA had the largest number of black African members compared to other mainline denominations, due to the Methodists’ multiracial work. It should, however, be noted that the dominant culture was that of the coloniser. In addition, Forster (2008, 5) argues that, at the time, the Methodist Church was the biggest English-speaking church in South Africa. Madise and Taunyane (2012, 6) posit that the colonial undertone of the Methodists’ missionary work was so profound that it led to divisions within the Methodist Church. The first of these divisions was led, in 1884, by Nehemia Tile, who opined that the indigenous people were being alienated within the Methodist Church. Kumalo (2018, 4) adds James Mata Dwane and Mangena Mokone to the list of leaders’ names who left the Methodist Church. Against this background, the article attempts to argue that the tension between the colonial imposition of Methodism persists within the MCSA, despite its predominantly black African members.

It can be argued that the colonial undertone of the missionaries’ work was further exacerbated by the apartheid government’s Group Areas Act No. 41 of 1950, which was aimed at dividing people by race (Forster 2008, 8). This background highlights the tension explored in the article in that European culture was dominant, whereas ATR and African traditional culture were suppressed. According to Forster (2008, 12), “sadly, missionary imperialism often sought to eradicate elements of African tradition and religion”. The article argues that the MCSA’s move in this regard has been slow. To expand on this, the recently published research by MCSA clergy, Mokhutso (2019; 2021); Ngcayisa (2021); Sekhejane (2022), as well as Dreyer and Sekhejane (2022) is explored in order to demonstrate this persistent tension in question.

Firstly, the article explores the strides made by the MCSA to adjust and position itself between different historical, political and economic landscapes in Southern Africa.

These major strides were the Obedience 81 statement (MCSA 1981); the Journey to The New Land (MCSA 1995); and the two Mission Congresses (MCSA 2005; 2016). The vision and mission of the MCSA, as well as the mission imperatives, were crafted and adopted (MCSA 2006). Due to the scope of the article, the focus will be on the “One and Undivided” church mission policy accepted by the MCSA Conference in 1958; the birth and ethos of the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC); and the Methodist Mission Congress. Thus, the article seeks to reaffirm Williams and Bentley’s (2020, 1) argument that “being the church in Africa requires a continuous self-assessment by Christian denominations, asking whether it is sufficiently contextualised both in its doctrines and practices”.

“One and Undivided” Church – 1958

The MCSA has undergone countless reforms since its independence from the British Methodist Church Conference in 1926. However, hardly anything has been done with regard to the tensions that often emerge between Christianity and ATR (MCSA 2016, 23). The reforms in question resulted from the MCSA establishing itself as an independent African church. The MCSA had to respond to the apartheid government’s policies such as the Group Areas Act No. 41 of 1950 and the Separate Amenities Act No. 49 of 1953. These were a challenge to the MCSA, primarily because of its multiracial work (Forster 2008, 8). Despite the multiracial work which the Methodist missionaries embraced, and the church in its establishment, that does not mean that the white missionaries viewed Africans as equals. It may be further argued that the work done by multiracial people does not equate to multiracial work; one race is always the dominant over the other. As mentioned, the dominant culture within the MCSA was that of the colonisers. The indigenous Methodists had to discard their own African traditional belief system and adopt that of the coloniser. Bailie (2009, 81) attests to this, stating that, at one stage in the MCSA, liberation theologies such as African Methodist theology, black consciousness, black theology, and feminist theology emerged. He argues that these theologies emerged within the MCSA because many black African members were not aligned to the Western theological thinking of the church. At a later stage, Bailie (2009, 83, 84) further argues that, nowadays, the colonial influenced fundamentalist Methodism has an opportunity to reflect theologically on theological concepts from an African perspective. Masoga (2014, 37) points to one of the sons of the MCSA, Gabriel Setiloane, an avid researcher who challenged the Western theological discourses both within the MCSA and on a global scale. Again, the MCSA had to come up with a statement, namely, the resolution to be a “One and Undivided” church. This was in response to the apartheid government’s policies aimed at dividing people by race, thereby dividing the church. In response to this pressure, the MCSA (1958, 202) submitted the following statement as its stance:

Like other parts of the life of our country, the Church is facing choices which will determine her future development, and in particular the choice between unity and division. The Conference, in prayer and heartsearching, expressed its conviction that it

is the will of God for the Methodist Church that it should be one and undivided, trusting to the leading of God to bring this ideal to ultimate fruition.

Sadly, despite the MCSA having challenged the apartheid government, it continued to perpetuate apartheid against its own. According to Forster (2008, 8–9), at the time,

the Methodist Church was facing significant pressure both from conservative members within its ranks, mainly white members and from the Nationalist government to segregate along racial lines. Many other denominations had already done so, and others had been segregated from their missionary beginnings.

Mtshiselwa (2016, 112) states that, at a conference held in 1981, Methodists reaffirmed the 1958 statement, later known as “Obedience 81”, and unanimously declared “that it is the will of God for the Methodist Church that it should be one and undivided”. The 1958 statement, famously known as “One and Undivided” church, showcases one of the many struggles the MCSA had to navigate, in order to remain faithful to its Methodist ethos of social holiness as taught by Wesley. It was a powerful stance for the MCSA to take, despite other denominations following the government route of separating their members by race (Forster 2008, 10). This historical background highlights the following points:

- As much as Methodism in Southern Africa has been multiracial from the onset, this does not mean it did not have some colonial undertone to it, and neither does it mean that black African members were not undermined, including their indigenous religion and culture. It is evident that the African world view was never given an opportunity within the MCSA. Thus, the article argues that this is still the case, to a certain extent.
- The theology that persisted within the MCSA was Western and did not penetrate the lives of the black African members; hence, the schism as highlighted.
- It is also evident that, despite the MCSA’s statement, “One and Undivided” church, the church in practice was not one, but divided. It is also evident that the dominant group within the MCSA consisted of whites, their culture, and a Western-packaged theology.

Black Methodist Consultation

Despite the “One and Undivided” church statement in 1958, racism persisted in the MCSA and a bias towards Western culture. For this reason, within the MCSA, black clergy and laity saw a need to establish an organisation called the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC). Mtshiselwa (2015, 3) states that “BMC emerged from an interaction between black South African political activists, the black theologians of liberation and the black ministers in the MCSA to redress racism”. Kumalo (2018, 5) details this emergence of the BMC, stating that Reverend Ernest Baartman started BMC in May 1975 in St John’s Methodist Church in Bloemfontein. Reverend Baartman

convened a meeting of black Methodist ministers to reflect on the ministry of the MCSA from a black perspective. The black experience statement showcases that the black African members in the MCSA needed to have a voice. The BMC was formed at this meeting, and an executive committee was elected to lead this new movement. Rev. Baartman was elected as the first chairperson; Dr Khoza Mgojo as secretary, and Rev. Andrew Losaba as treasurer, with the following objectives:

1. Equal representation in the structures of the Church.
2. Same treatment of all Methodist ministers, especially with regard to stations.
3. Dismantling of old traditions, customs, and racism.
4. Growth of African spirituality.
5. Equality in financial remuneration of ministers.
6. The combining of synods instead of two separate ones based on race.
7. The development of black consciousness and political awareness amongst Black clergy. (Kumalo 2018, 5)

The BMC's objectives clearly highlight the fact that black African members had no standing. It is interesting to note Forster's (2008, 12) statement that the Methodist Church has never had an official point of view concerning inequality between black and white Methodists. Although that may be the case, some practices within the MCSA were racist, as noted by Forster (2008, 11):

More than 75 per cent of the membership of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa is black, yet in the early 1970s the leadership of the Church did not reflect this reality. Black Methodists were largely excluded from the decision-making processes of their Church.

Mtshiselwa (2015, 7) further highlights other racist practices within the MCSA that placed white clergy in a position of comfort and privilege, and explains that white ordained ministers would not be stationed (placed) in rural areas where there is poverty and a lack of resources. According to Mtshiselwa (2015, 7), "[this] means that in terms of the stationing system in the MCSA, white ministers are immune to being placed in a context of poverty where they could live without a source of income". This and many other reasons led to the birth of the BMC, whose key mandate was to unmask racism within the MCSA (Mtshiselwa 2015, 7).

The BMC also became a significant force that guided the MCSA towards reinventing itself as an African Christian denomination (Forster 2008, 12). The following historical point demonstrates the racism and suppression of black African members in the MCSA. It is obvious that the black African members' personhood, gifts, skills, language, and culture were not recognised; hence, the emergence of organisations such as the BMC. The fact that the tension between Christianity and ATR was due to the dominance of a

Western culture can be identified. ATR, culture and language have never been given space nor fully entertained within the MCSA.

Some Steps the MCSA Took to Reposition Itself in South/ern Africa

Mission Congress (2004)

According to Forster (2008, 17), in 2004, ten years after the advent of democracy in South Africa, the MCSA held a meeting, which they called the Mission Congress, to position itself within the new political climate in South Africa. The Mission Congress was summoned by the then Presiding Bishop, Rev. Ivan Abrahams who called on all Methodists to meet in Umtata.

At the conference in 2005, the Mission Charter¹ was formally adopted (Bentley 2014, 5). The *Yearbook* (MCSA 2004a, 37) clarifies what the Mission Congress aimed to achieve:

The primary purpose of the Mission Congress shall be to explore ways for the MCSA at every level to faithfully and fruitfully implement the objectives of the Mission and vision statements of the Church within the framework of the mission imperatives. The Mission Congress is also directed to identify stumbling-blocks and obstacles to mission within the MCSA and formulate appropriate responses.

Forster (2008, 17) argues that the vision coined by Methodists at this Mission Congress recognised that African spirituality “is both valid and valuable as an instrument for achieving God’s mission in the world”. The Mission Congress also adopted four mission imperatives, namely:

1. A deepened spirituality as individuals and a Christian Community.
2. Justice and service in Church and society.
3. Evangelism and Church growth which build up the people of God.
4. Empowerment and development which give dignity and a new purpose to those who have been deprived. (MCSA 2004)

This journey, on which the MCSA embarked, showcases that it is, by its nature, a discerning Church that always seeks to renew itself. The MCSA recognised that it was still relevant to God’s call for all Methodists in Southern Africa.

¹ The Mission Unit of the Church published a detailed document entitled *Mission Congress 2004: Report on the Key Outcomes of the Mission Congress*. This was followed by the *Mission Charter* that was tabled and adopted by the 117th Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in Johannesburg (see MCSA 2006, 3–22).

A Demonstration and Critique of the Tension between Christianity and ATR within the MCSA

The article has, thus far, attempted to show that the MCSA went through various processes of renewal and adaptations, from being a British-packaged product to being an African one, specifically a Southern African Church. However, the article intends to argue that, despite the strides the MCSA made until the dawn of democracy in South Africa, there remains a tension between Christianity and ATR. The article explains this by analysing the following four recent research projects published between 2019 and 2022 by emerging Methodist scholars.

Mokhutso (2019)

The first research to be explored was conducted by Mokhutso (2019) in Moreleta Circuit (Circuit 1102) in the Tshwane municipality, Gauteng, South Africa. The focus of his research emanated from an observation that, during his tenure as a resident minister in Mamelodi Central, from 2017 to 2019, members of the MCSA in Mamelodi professed to be Christian believers. However, in times of bereavement, they incorporated African traditional bereavement rituals with Christian burial rites. Mokhutso (2019, 6) asks: Why are these MCSA members incorporating the two bereavement rituals? Does it mean that the Christian bereavement rituals of the MCSA are inadequate? Are they lacking something? Further questions were asked about African traditional rituals which led to the question: Why did other members of the MCSA in Mamelodi not incorporate these two rituals? Perhaps Ntombana (2015, 104) states as truth that members in the mainline churches seem to struggle with two identities, where they are caught between a Western-packaged Christianity and African traditional rituals. Mokhutso (2019, 6–7) further wanted to understand the meaning of the bereavement rituals practised within the MCSA and whence they emanated. The same with African traditional rituals. Mokhutso (2019, 6) observed that these African traditional rituals are often practised privately (away from the church), and that the church is not officially invited to, nor made aware of, such practices.

Mokhutso (2019, 66) interviewed 15 participants, and the focus was particularly on Methodists who had recently experienced bereavement. The participants' ages ranged between 21 and 61 years. Eight participants were female, and seven were male. The research objectives were: (1) to explore the meaning of bereavement rituals for the Methodist Church members in Mamelodi; (2) to establish the significance of African traditional bereavement rituals; (3) to establish the significance of Christian bereavement rituals; to examine why members of the Methodist Church combine African traditional and Christian bereavement rituals; and (4) to find out why African traditional rituals are often kept secret.

The article focuses more on the fourth research objective, namely, “to examine why members of the Methodist Church combine African traditional and Christian bereavement rituals” (Mokhutso 2019, 6). This led Mokhutso (2021, 1) to ask the

following questions: “Are the Methodist Church’s bereavement rituals conducted during bereavement insufficient? Does this phenomenon 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?”

Mokhutso (2019, 74) found that the participants combined the Christian and African traditional bereavement rituals for two reasons. Firstly, the participants alluded to the fact that the bereavement rituals in the church cater for their Christian aspect; the church comforts and supports them during this time. Secondly, the church’s bereavement rituals do not accommodate their African-ness such as dealing with issues of *sefifi* or a negative cloud that is believed to cover the bereaved until certain rituals are performed and the bereaved have mourned for a specific period (Mokhutso, 2019, 74). According to the African world view, death brings to the bereaved impurity that needs to be restored to a state of purity by way of rituals (Mokhutso 2019, 74). Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (2014, 232) state clearly that death, in the African perspective, is a natural transition from the visible to the invisible spiritual ontology where the spirit, the essence of the person, is not destroyed, but goes on to live within the spirit of their ancestors. According to Chukwuedo and Ede (2019, 96), in African understanding, death is not an elimination but an extension. With death, life continues in another realm. It is from this understanding that traditional rituals are paramount for black Africans during funerals. Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (2014, 234) emphasise that, in order to understand Africans’ thinking and practices, their world-view, which influences their ways of knowing and doing, has to be understood. On the other hand, the Christian understanding of death is that death is temporal, because, during the resurrection, all Christians will be woken up and their bodies will be transformed. They will then die no more (Ayodeji 2013, 510). Ayodeji (2013, 510) further states that, “in Christian faith, it is believed that this present life will end at death and another life will begin”. It can be noted, from the onset, that there are different understandings of death from the African perspective and from the Christian perspective. The participants mentioned that African traditional bereavement rituals closes this gap, unlike the bereavement rituals offered by the MCSA (Mokhutso 2019, 75). Having discovered this, Mokhutso (2019, 76) states:

The MCSA belongs to the mainline churches, which are former missionary churches. These churches are inclined to the Western culture, and there is no room for guidance with regard to African cultural practices. The MCSA does not even have guidelines with regard to which of the rituals are not accepted or in breach of its beliefs and doctrine. Hence the participants perform the rituals that work for them.

Mokhutso’s (2019, 1) research not only highlights the tension between Christianity and ATR, but also notes the lack of guidelines from the MCSA. This issue creates room for the clergy and members of the MCSA to conclude for themselves what works for them. Mokhutso’s research brings to the fore other dynamics regarding the tension the article seeks to highlight. The article questions the MCSA that has been active in Africa for

years but is still silent within its doctrines and polity when it comes to the challenges its African members face; hence, the tension. This uncertainty leads MCSA members to live a double life. Hence, Ntombana (2015, 107) argues that, within the mainline churches, such as Presbyterian and Methodist, there is no stance on what he terms “African rituals”. Ntombana (2015, 107) mentions that black African members within these mainline churches find themselves caught between what he terms “the package of Western Christian” and practising their “traditional rituals”, which is a point of the article. Mokhutso’s research highlights that there is tension between the Christian and ATR world view when it comes to death. As much as the church goes out of its way to support its members during their time of loss, what the church offers is not enough for all its black African members. Ntombana (2015, 107) notes that, “in most Mainline Churches, the issue of ancestral relationship and ritual practices is left with individuals to decide”. This makes matters worse because the clergy do not have a polity to rely on or use to advise their members. Ntombana (2015, 107) concludes that “mission churches like the Presbyterian and Methodist do not have a specific stand on the matter”.

Ngcayisa (2021)

The second research explored in the article was conducted by Rev. Them bani Ngcayisa, an ordained Methodist minister and an emerging theologian. In his research, Ngcayisa (2021, 1) reflects on the hybridisation of Christianity and ATR in the MCSA. Ngcayisa (2021, 4) explains the interests of his study as follows:

Seeks to understand how practising Christianity and African Traditional Religion together contribute to the lived experiences of ordained ministers in The Methodist Church of Southern Africa in relation to their Christian identity, relationship with God and how the merging of these two distinct religions contributes to their exercise of ministry.

The research objectives were: (1) to explore and understand the lived experiences of black African ordained ministers of the MCSA, who simultaneously use rituals and practices in ATR; (2) to determine whether their practical involvement in ATR customs and rituals contributes to their Christian identity; (3) to establish whether their practical involvement in African traditional customs and rituals contributes to their relationship with God; and (4) to establish whether their practical involvement in African Traditional Religion’s customs and rituals contributes to their exercise of the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the MCSA (Ngcayisa 2021, 4).

The four research participants were all black African ordained Methodist ministers; however, they had opposing views about what it means to live out their Christian faith and simultaneously embrace their African religious heritage. One of the participants who were interviewed by Ngcayisa (2021, 64) responded as follows: “African religious heritage speaks of where I come from and forms a strong part of my identity, and it does not take away anything from me being Christian.” Another participant asserted that “Christianity needs to be enculturated and contextualised to speak to the spirituality of

the African people and in so doing it ultimately enhances the individual in undertaking their work in the ministry” (Ngcayisa 2012, 64). It should be noted that another of the participants interviewed by Ngcayisa (2012, 64) had a different view:

Rev. Ngema is the only one who asserts differently in that she does not believe these two should be mixed while her own lived experience includes her participating in rituals which require her to brew African beer for African ceremonies. She thus feels that “to other persons it would seem a mixture of Christianity and African religious heritage”, and for her these are separate things.

A paradox in Ngcayisa’s (2021) work was that the participants differed fundamentally from a theological perspective. Ngcayisa’s (2021, 1) research also highlighted the tension between Christianity and ATR among the clergy in the MCSA. Ngcayisa’s research contested the theological views within the MCSA when it comes to the relationship between Christianity and ATR. Some clergy seem to note the connection between the two, while others seem to note a tension between the two. Unfortunately, Ngcayisa (2021, 1) only interviewed four clergypersons for his research; one wonders what the views of the other clergypersons in the MCSA are regarding the topic under study. It is interesting to note that the tension is not only among laity, as was the focus of Mokhutso’s research (2019, 66), but that this tension exists among the clergy too. Therefore, the tension is not only in terms of certain social and cultural practices, but also theological ones.

Dreyer and Sekhejane (2022)

The third research explored in the article is the work of Dreyer and Sekhejane (2022), who focus on the baptism of stillborn babies from the Methodist perspective. The article derives from the PhD research of Sekhejane (2022), supervised by Dreyer. Dreyer and Sekhejane (2022, 1) highlight one of the challenges they came across when conducting their research: “In the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), no records of stillbirth baptisms are kept in the Church archives, nor is there any pastoral guidance or liturgy available to assist grieving families regarding stillbirth.” Dreyer and Sekhejane (2022, 1) found themselves drawn to this topic, as ministers within the MCSA faced countless requests from different families to baptise their stillborn babies. In his PhD research, Sekhejane (2022, 2) mentions various reasons by parents who are worried that, if their stillborn babies are not baptised, they may not find rest with God and their ancestors. Further, Sekhejane (2022, 2) mentions that parents are often worried about where their children will be placed as far as their ancestors are concerned. Sekhejane (2022, 2) highlights a challenge and tension in such instances where clergypersons find themselves caught between theological and doctrinal integrity and pastoral care for the grieving family. The worst part is that there is no available liturgy or guidelines in the MCSA for the clergypersons to lean on during this time. Dreyer and Sekhejane (2022, 2) argue that the requests by parents of stillborn babies are driven by the African world-view and fear that their children will not be accepted in the land of their ancestors, nor by God, without baptism. Some families believe that children should be baptised before

the burial for a successful reunion with their ancestors. This research further highlighted the tension between Christianity and ATR.

In the MCSA, baptism is for the living, as it is a sacrament given to the Church by Jesus Christ as an outward sign of the new life with God offered to all believers through Christ. It is through baptism that a believer enters God's family (MCSA 2016, 13). Furthermore, baptism in the MCSA is understood as a sacrament where the church proclaims God's grace and looks forward to lifelong growth into Christ in the fellowship of the church (MCSA 2016, 14). Therefore, baptism is not for the dead, but for the living. Dreyer and Sekhejane (2022, 4) elaborate on this: "In the MCSA, stillbirth baptism is not an option, as this rite is meant for the living. There is no evidence in Scripture of Jesus Christ or his disciples baptising the dead." It is evident from Dreyer and Sekhejane (2022, 4) that members of the MCSA use stillborn baptism as an ancestral ritual. This is understandable, as Bhuda, Motswaledi and Marumo (2023, 4) state that bereavement rituals among Africans are paramount because, if they are not performed, it is believed that the living family members will be plagued by the ancestors' wrath before they meet those ritual specifications. Worse still, in the midst of this pastoral conundrum, the clergy are at the forefront of these dynamics. It is interesting to note that Mokhutso (2019, 1) makes a similar observation, namely that there is lack of guidance from the MCSA for its clergy and laity on this subject.

DEWCOM (2020)

The last research explored in the article is a discussion document by the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee (DEWCOM 2020) within the MCSA that is earmarked to reflect theologically on matters of Doctrine, Ethics and Worship. DEWCOM (2020, 1) has prepared a document in which it reflects on ancestral calling within the MCSA. The document concludes that

the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) has no official position on the Traditional African Cultural practices of our Southern African communities. Our congregants who are members of these communities affected by these cultural practices which are part of their daily lives, are then forced to live double lives. One in the shadows and one in the public domain, "*A Methodist by day and a Pentecostal by night*".

This quotation further highlights the tension between Christianity and ATR within the MCSA. The document emphasises the challenges of ancestral calling and healing methods preferred by the MCSA. What role can *sangomas* play in the MCSA? What recognition does the MCSA give those with ancestral calling? These are other questions on which the document reflects (DEWCOM 2020, 4). Mtshiselwa (2016, 103) acknowledges the strides the MCSA has made in becoming an African church, by referring to the use of drums during worship, and the use of African rhythm and idioms during preaching. Thus, the article argues that this is a scratch on the surface; instead, black African Methodists are struggling with much deeper African issues.

A Critique of the Tensions between Christianity and ATR in the MCSA

The above explanation of the tension on which the article focuses, critiquing recent research by various Methodist scholars, attests to the argument that there is tension between Christianity and ATR within the MCSA. The scholars have highlighted some areas where this tension persists and focused on participants with distinct roles in both the church and the community.

Suggestions for Diffusing the Tension between Christianity and ATR – a Need for Decoloniality in the MCSA

The article suggests that the MCSA should undergo a process of decoloniality as a way of self-critique. Williams and Bentley (2020, 1) elaborate on the importance of self-critique: “self-critique is essential so as to not perpetuate negative colonial influences in a way churches operate”. Williams and Bentley (2020, 3) observe an incongruity between some practices in the MCSA and its African context. They focus squarely on the act of ordination in the MCSA as not reflecting the African context. Thus, the article argues that the church needs to pay attention to aspects such as decoloniality. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 485) defines decoloniality as follows:

Decoloniality is born out of a realisation that the modern world is an asymmetrical world order that is sustained not only by colonial matrices of power but also by pedagogies and epistemologies of equilibrium that continue to produce alienated Africans that are socialised into hating Africa that produced them and liking Europe and America that reject them. Schools, colleges, churches, and universities in Africa are sites for reproduction of coloniality. We so far don't have African universities. We have universities in Africa.

Reflecting on Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2015, 485) statement, a question may be posed: Is the MCSA an African church or a church in Africa with the British outlook, and epistemologies? If the MCSA is an African church, why is *The Methodist Book of Order, Liturgies, Doctrines and Teachings* (MCSA 2016) silent on matters that are of interest to its African membership? If British people were to attend an event such as a funeral, a wedding, or a baptism in the MCSA, especially in a rural or township church, would such a service reflect that the funeral, wedding, or baptism was conducted in an African church? Yes, the singing, dancing, drums, and even the language of hymns sung, do, in some instances, reflect this point. However, does this fully reflect how Africans celebrate, bury their loved ones, and marry? To drive this point home, DEWCOM (2020, 2) notes that, in the MCSA, a huge number of its members live a double life. The main reason for the rise of this category of people is “spiritual hunger” Williams and Bentley (2020, 4) also note some of the tensions as far as understanding a call is concerned. They cite Nyobole (2018), former General Secretary of the MCSA, who states that there are candidates for ministry who would have had dreams and visions to join the ministry; sadly, these candidates would choose not to mention the dreams and visions they had when relating their call. Instead, Nyobole (2018) mentions that they would share their call as “what may be deemed to be acceptable criteria”.

Nyobole's (2018) statement shows that there is a need for the MCSA to revisit its recognition of African spirituality as essential to African people. This is rather unfortunate, as this means that black African members in the MCSA do not feel at home. From what has been explored, black African Methodists are tiptoeing between Christianity and ATR. They are struggling with some issues, but for them to belong, they must adjust their African-ness to the Westernised norms in the MCSA.

The scholars whose work was consulted for the article emphasise that the MCSA has not produced helpful guidelines for its members regarding the tension between Christianity and ATR. For this reason, Williams and Bentley (2020, 3) note the following: "The conclusions to be drawn are that not only was the MCSA very English in the past but also it remains very English in its doctrine and practices." Therefore, a quest for decoloniality is paramount for the MCSA, in order to achieve its vision of "A Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of Nations".

Engaging the Vision of the MCSA

The vision of the MCSA (2022, 3) is "a Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of nations". The vision of the MCSA is well placed and reflects the intentions of the church to root itself within the African context. For the MCSA to realise its vision, it should not only acknowledge, but also embrace the African world view. African people continue to wrestle with questions about spirits, ancestral calling, witchcraft, healing, and so on, all hinged on the African world view. The challenge is that the MCSA does not give them answers; these people either leave the MCSA for African Indigenous/Independent Churches or live a double life which is not helpful.

Characteristics of the African World View

What does the African world view mean? Mbiti (1975, 11) first emphasises the fact that ATR is not a religion like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and others. According to Mbiti (1975, 11), it affects Africans' way of life in totality – how they think about the universe; their attitude towards life; and how they relate not only to their fellow human beings but also to nature. Adamo (2011, 3) gives key characteristics of ATR as the feature of an African world view.

The Supreme Being and Human Beings

Africans believe that the creator of all things is God, who is referred to as the Supreme Being, who is above and in control of all things (Adamo 2011, 3). God is understood to be everlasting, omniscient, omnipotent, and always in control. For this reason, Nurnberger (2007, 32) rightfully states:

The Supreme Being is not accessible in the communicative sense of the word at all. This is not because "he" is evil, but because he is too great. His impact is too comprehensive. Communication with the Supreme Being is, in the great majority of cases, not deemed

possible, not even desirable, because his “weight” is too mysterious and too massive to be amenable for human understanding and manipulation.

Africans also believe that God created all creation, including human beings. To be human is to belong to a community, to be part of a tribe. Furthermore, the community in question is not only a community with humanity and nature, but also a community with the spirit world. For Africans, the spirit world has a hierarchy: the Supreme Being, divinities, spirits and ancestors (Adamo 2011, 3). To keep the community in a harmonious relationship, rituals play a significant role in the life of Africans.

Divinities

Divinities are ranked after God in the hierarchy of the spirit world in the African world view. They are God’s creations. Their role is to act as intermediaries between God and human beings (Adamo 2011, 4).

Ancestors

Ancestors are ranked third in the hierarchy of the spirit world: “Ancestors are people who have made it to the spirit land and are venerated by their descendants. They are regarded as part of the elders of the families with enhanced powers to bless, protect or punish the families” (Adamo 2011, 4).

Spirits

Africans believe that there are good spirits and evil spirits. The good spirits can do good, whereas the evil spirits can harm human beings. According to Mbiti (1969, 78), spirits are below divinities and above human beings in status. Spirits have more power than men (Mbiti 1969, 79). Spirits are believed to dwell in forests, mountains, and around villages. Good spirits act as intermediaries between people and God; bad spirits can be manipulated by people to cause harm, and kill (Mbiti 1969, 79–81).

Rituals

Ohaja and Anyim (2021, 1) argue that rituals are crucial in the lives of Africans; they accompany all aspects of their lives, from birth to death. Rituals give meaning to Africans’ way of being and are important to them because they are linked to the human cycle from birth to death: “All stages of life in Africa are ritually celebrated” (Ohaja and Anyim 2021, 3); rituals are understood to have the power to fix things during crisis, illness, and so on, and they connect the physical and the spiritual world (Ohaja and Anyim 2021, 3).

Kyalo (2013, 36) mentions that rituals are of great significance for Africans because they provide structure and ease the movement from the known to the unknown, and “ritual expresses our deepest understanding of the world”.

Discussion

While investigating the baptism of stillborn babies, Sekhejane (2022, 5) could not find any information or records on pastoral care, guidance, or liturgy in this regard. Mokhutso (2019, 1) shares similar sentiments regarding which bereavement rituals are permitted and which are in breach of the teaching and doctrines of the MCSA. Furthermore, Sekhejane (2022, 1) found that many families request this form of baptism, which signifies a need for it, and for the clergy to offer theological guidance in this regard. In his report from the Connexional Executive, the former Presiding Bishop of the MCSA, Rev. Ivan Abrahams, writes:

My experience has been that Black voices sometimes fail to articulate what should be communicated and if such voices do not get a hearing, they are denied the opportunity for expression. Where there is no dialogue there is rumour. Rumour instigates bitterness that degenerates into conflict. (MCSA 2004, 24–25)

Hence, the article suggests that all structures of the MCSA should discuss the issue of Christianity and ATR. It has attempted to show that, despite previous discussions on these matters, the church has not moved, as desired by many, regarding its doctrines and liturgies. According to Adamo (2011, 5, citing Panikkar 1975, 707–709):

What is dialogue? Religious dialogue means the exchange of views and insights by means of concepts expressed in words that are based on previous agreement concerning the common, which the dialogue thereafter tries to widen and deepen, so as to pinpoint divergences, similarities, complementarities, and criticisms, as well as to find the loci where mutual influence or fecundation may take place.

If this process takes place within the MCSA, the article submits that it may be of great assistance to both laity and clergy in the MCSA. The literature review attests to the fact that black African Methodist members still have issues relating to ATR. In some instances, the clergy become vulnerable because they do not have a church policy or liturgy to guide them in this matter. Adamo's (2011, 9) words seem to reflect the status of the MCSA: "It seems Christianity in Africa has not adequately tapped this resource that can make Christianity authentically African." Mokhutso (2021, 8) argues that the silence regarding matters of ATR is detrimental not only to the church, but also to MCSA members' spiritual well-being.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to highlight the tension between Christianity and ATR in the MCSA. A number of areas were stressed, such as dual practices of Christian and ATR bereavement rituals (Mokhutso 2019, 1); incorporating Christianity and ATR (Ngcayisa 2022, 1); the baptism of stillborn babies (Sekhejane 2022, 1); and the challenges of ancestral calling (DEWCOM 2020, 1) in the MCSA. In all the literature consulted, there is a lack of guidance from the MCSA and openness regarding ATR.

The article concludes that the MCSA should continue the journey that started with the Mission Congress, from resolutions taken to practical steps such as dialogue leading to guidelines or church policies. Further, the article argues that this is an opportunity for the church to put on paper some practical African practices appropriate to the MCSA's teachings and doctrines. It would help if the church could have a voice as to what is acceptable and not acceptable as a guide for its clergy and members. Therefore, the article submits that this is also an opportunity for the MCSA to discuss all aspects concerning ATR.

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