

Professor Canaan Sodindo Banana and His Border-Crossing Antics: Lessons for the Church and Citizenry in Kairos Moments

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Abstract

Professor Canaan Sodindo Banana (5 March 1936 – 10 November 2003) was a complex person with a complex historical context that began with his birth from mixed parentage. His father, a practitioner of Christianity and a herbalist, further influenced him to see no difference between African ancestors and Hebrew patriarchs. He became a cleric in the Zimbabwean Methodist Church from where he was exposed to the World Council of Churches (WCC) Programme to Combat Racism (PCR). In 1971, he resigned from the church after it voted against the PCR, which he felt was justified. Instead, in 1973, he travelled to the United States, without a passport, probably to free himself from oppression. When he returned to Zimbabwe and joined politics, to fill the gap created by the arrest of nationalists, he was active in the United African National Congress (UANC), but frustrated by its moderate approach to the problem of racism, in 1976, he joined the radical Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). In 1998, when he was accused of sodomy, probably to deter him from joining the opposition for his sharp disagreements with former President Robert Mugabe, he crossed the South African border with Botswana without a passport. This article discusses the history of ethnicity, African identity and African Traditional Religion, Western Christianity, and the rise of African consciousness as well as the violence that emerged from the colonial powers in Banana's life. This context shaped his character and personality, so much so that "what he became to us was a product of his historical context". Banana defied the sense of security found in colonial borders, and his attempt to free himself from the constraints of hegemony were useful lessons for his Kairos moments.



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Introduction

This article argues that the emergence of religious leaders in Zimbabwe's political landscape in the early 1960s was intricately linked to the country's tumultuous political history. The Chinhoyi Battle of 29 April 1966, and the Wankie Battle from April to June 1967, were pivotal events that escalated the political violence in colonial Zimbabwe (Dabengwa 2019; Tsigo and Ndawana 2019). Political resistance against the white regime turned into more violent battles, reminiscent of the resistance tactics employed by the African National Congress's (ANC) 1961 Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK) in South Africa, which was formed to combat apartheid through acts of sabotage and guerrilla warfare (Cherry 2011).

As a result of the 1964 coup against former Prime Minister Winston Field (1904–1969) led by Ian Douglas Smith (1919–2007), then leader of the Rhodesian Front Party (RFP), which effectively dismantled the 1961 Constitution, Zimbabwe's liberation movements, such as the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU, founded in 1963) and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU, founded in 1962), began to gain momentum (Mlambo 2014). Smith ordered the police to arrest and sentence all ZAPU and ZANU leadership (including Joshua Nkomo, Ntabaningi Sithole, Robert Mugabe, Leopold Takawira, Maurice Nyagumbo, Edgar Tekere, and Josiah Chinamano, among others) amidst widespread violence and political unrest, which created a leadership vacuum within the African political community (Mtisi, Nyakudya and Barnes 2009). The arrest of the nationalist leaders left a leadership vacuum [a Kairos moment] and "in the absence of most nationalist leaders, [former Bishop Abel Tendekai] Muzorewa was one of those who spearheaded the campaign for a 'No' vote in the Pearce Referendum" (Mtisi, Nyakudya and Barnes 2009, 142). Later, in 1972, Canaan Sodindo Banana joined former Bishop Abel Tendekai Muzorewa during the British settlement attempts led by former British Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home (1903–1995). Muzorewa and Banana led opposition to the Douglas-Home–Smith settlement efforts, and in 1973 formed the African National Council (ANC), which later became the United African National Council (UANC), with efforts to guide the liberation struggle. Thus, the involvement of religious leaders in the political arena during this period underscores the complex interplay between religion, politics, and liberation struggles in Zimbabwe. Their leadership not only filled a void but also exemplified the broader societal push for freedom and self-determination. This historical context sheds light on the multifaceted dynamics that shaped Banana's personality, character and actions, which have had a lasting impact on Zimbabwe's history.

The Historical Background of Professor Canaan Sodindo Banana

Professor Canaan Sodindo Banana was born on 5 March 1936 in Esiphezini, Essexvale District, Matabeleland (now Esigodini) (Gunda 2015, 27). His father (of unknown origin) was a migrant worker and a peasant farmer (Meldrum 2003). While there is high speculation that his mother was a *Chihera* (of the Eland totem) from Buhera, his father's ethnic identity remains illusory – with many unanswered questions. It has been asked whether Banana was of Nguni blood, that is, Ndebele, or whether he was Sotho, Malawian, or Kalanga (Gunda 2015, 27; Lentz 2014; Meldrum 2003). If he was Nguni-related, and of ethnic mix, could the name “Banana” ring any bell? Could his name have been (V)anana (i.e. children) from the Venda language? This speaks to Banana's border-crossing antics, especially in view of the colonial violence that was meted against people's identities, hence this could be regarded as a bastardisation of the name. Such form of violence could have triggered rebellious opinions in Banana's mind, justifying Gundani's (2023) statement that “what he became to us was a product of his historical context”.

Banana, however, learnt a lot from his family, described by Chitando (2004, 188) as “struggling peasants”, where his father was a teacher and a lay preacher in the Methodist Church, a migrant worker and a peasant farmer (Meldrum 2003), and “also an African herbalist”. Gunda (2015, 28) observes that Canaan followed in his father's footsteps (or even further than his father) by reconciling African medicine (seen as dark arts) and lay preaching to become a church minister, theologian and politician. It was derided by the colonial laws, especially the 1899 Witchcraft Suppression Act, to see a Christian mixing their faith with African Traditional Religion. This context further shaped his approach to life, as it was juxtaposed with excesses of oppression and strengths of resistance, while at the same time he crossed between the Christian faith and African Traditional Religion.

Banana's educational trajectory was marked by a deliberate pursuit of theological and pedagogical expertise, which enabled him to occupy various roles in the church and education sector (border-crossing antics in the professional world). His formative years at primary level were spent at Mzinyati Mission, then he went to Luveve High for his secondary education, and Tegwani Teacher Training College, where he earned an Education teacher's qualification (Banana 1990, xii). Subsequently, he pursued advanced studies at Epworth Theological College, Kansai Industrial Centre, Wesley Theological Seminary, and the University of South Africa, ultimately earning a master's degree in Theological Studies from the Wesleyan/American University (1975) and a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Zimbabwe (1996) (Chitando 2004, 190).

Throughout his academic journey, Banana's commitment to his craft was evident, as he simultaneously taught, ministered and served as a schools administrator, a council chair and an advisory committee member for various organisations (Gunda 2015, 29). When

he retired from politics, Banana “became an Honorary Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy at the University of Zimbabwe” (Chitando 2004, 190), where he continued with his political activism, and his commitment to social justice and reconciliation in Zimbabwe (Chitando 2004, 191). Banana was very good at combining different things in his life like politics, sport, religion, education and social activism. Thus, “He [Banana] represents the second generation of African mission-school-educated elites who pioneered the African people’s struggle against ecclesial and political oppression by the whites in the church and society” (Kumalo and Taruona 2024, 1).

The Impact of Combat Theology and Banana’s Activism

In the aftermath of the failure of the 1961 Constitution, the RFP suppressed (arrested and sentenced) ZANU and ZAPU political leaders to long jail terms. This was a result of the 1964 internal coup against Field by Smith, who because of the violent ZANU was going to give in and hand over power to the Africans. This created an opportune time, a Kairos moment, for church ministers to join the struggle. In this case, two Methodist ministers, Muzorewa and Banana, emerged by the end of 1965 to the beginning of 1966 to fill the vacuum left by secular politicians. This study however is interested in Banana, who as President of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ), attended the 1969 Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) in Upsala, Sweden, from where he learnt something that was to meet with mixed reactions from the Methodist Church (Banana 1991a). The PCR aimed to address global racism, including apartheid in southern Africa, and was influential in shaping Banana’s Christian theology, leadership and advocacy. He immersed himself in “Combat Theology”, an approach that emphasised drawing on the Gospel’s teachings to combat injustice and inequality (Gutierrez 1971). This theology influenced his ministry and leadership to prioritise justice and human rights for the marginalised. In fact, his involvement in the transnational black liberation movement – which he joined when he went to the United States (US) – led him to assume multifaceted roles (i.e. border-crossing antics), including supporting the liberation struggle, mitigating ethnic violence, and advocating for democracy and human rights, while on the other hand he was a preacher of the Gospel.

In his 1996 thesis on *Combat Theology*, Banana argue that the church should take a proactive role in addressing social and political issues. He was a contemporary theologian who indicated that as a church, “we must do it”. In *The Gospel According to the Ghetto*, Banana (1990, 15) states: “Though I preach the sacred value of human life, if I sit on my hands and watch the oppression of my people, I am a hypocrite”. His involvement in the PCR was a Kairos moment that led him to resign from his position as Methodist President in 1971, as the MCZ did not support the initiative. The MCZ’s reversal of its stance on the PCR sparked tension, ultimately leading Banana to resign. In a subsequent development, Douglas-Home and Smith proposed a settlement plan for majority rule in Zimbabwe, which Muzorewa joined in 1973 (Tshifure 1996). This experience reinforced Banana’s conviction, as someone susceptible to crossing borders,

that his ministry extended beyond the borders of the Methodist Church. He considered that “the world is my parish” and in a Kairos moment, he “consciously decided to join party politics and took a leadership position without renouncing his priestly collar” (Gundani 2000, 176).

Banana and the Political Parties

Banana was a founding member of the United African National Congress (UANC), advocating for black independence and human rights. He campaigned extensively among the masses, urging people to focus on independence. Notably, Banana’s affiliation with UANC was short-lived. In 1976, he defected and crossed over, as was his custom, to ZANU, a radical political party, after returning from a conference in Geneva. This shift is attributed to his exposure to “black liberation theology” in the US from 1973–1975 (Urbaniak and Manobo 2020), but also an exposition of his character, as a border jumper. It was during this formative period that Banana’s ideological inclinations were shaped, precipitating a paradigmatic shift towards radicalisation. His subsequent involvement with ZANU, a trajectory which was likely catalysed by his experiences in Geneva in 1976, was characterised by a marked departure from his earlier affiliation with the moderate UANC. This transformation was exemplified by his assumption of the role of publicity secretary for ZANU, indicative of his commitment to the party’s radical vision of liberation (Tshifure 1996).

In 1978–1979, while incarcerated, Banana wrote *The Woman of My Imagination* (1980), an allegory against colonial and global racism, and his commitment to emancipate the ghetto people in Zimbabwe. The woman being referred to is the country, and the relationship is not sensual but patriotic. That is why Banana (1991, xi) writes: “My theology originates from the ghetto. It emanates from mundane situations of crises, incertitude, an inchoate life and futility, all caused by individualism.” In other words, Banana’s contention is on the lingering effects of colonialism, which can be highlighted in that, in 1980, local (black) priests could not baptise white (Caucasian) children. Thus, *The Woman of My Imagination* reflects upon the lingering North-South trade barriers; the dominance of Hollywood or Western culture on Africans; environmental degradation due to natural resource exploitation and pollution by Western industries; and the political interference of the West on African elections using sanctions. In Zimbabwe, Banana’s concerns were echoed in issues like the Washington Consensus (1990), the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (2001), and Foreign Direct Investment (2010–2020) (Mlambo 2006; World Bank 2024). Thus, *The Woman of My Imagination* can be translated to the idiom “The Zimbabwe We Want”, as presented by the churches (ZCC, EFZ and ZCBC 2006), and “The Africa We Want” (Akani 2019).

Banana and the Liberation Theologies

Banan, having been persecuted by the Rhodesian Regime, crossed borders and colonial boundaries to engage with liberation theology at the Wesleyan/American University

(1973–1975) in the US. There, he encountered progressive ideas from Latin America that greatly influenced his theological views. Banana thrived and borrowed everything that allowed him to grow from the groundswell of black theologies led by James Cone, Gustavo Gutierrez and Martin Luther King Jr. (Wallis 2018). Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, commonly referred to as “Monseñor Romero”, also played a multifaceted role in Banana’s life, shaping his consciousness on black liberation and human rights. Banana, who copied most of what Romero did, could be seen engaging in supporting social movements against the state when he was head of state. Romero was a key figure in the liberation theology movement in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s. Romero supported anti-apartheid movements, worked to mitigate ethnic violence, and advocated for democratic reforms. His involvement in transnational liberation movements resonated with similar struggles worldwide, including those led by Mugabe and Nkomo in Zimbabwe where Banana was a key figure (Kumalo and Taruona 2024). Romero’s defiance of the Catholic Church’s demand that he resign from government, mirroring Ernesto Cardenal’s stance in Nicaragua, was rooted in his commitment to liberation theology’s “preferential option for the poor” (Gutierrez 1971).

Romero’s theological framework, “preferential option for the poor”, which emphasised the need to prioritise the needs of the marginalised and oppressed. Romero’s response was exemplified in Banana’s book *The Gospel according to the Ghetto* (1990) in which he reinterprets the Lord’s Prayer, emphasising the struggle for social justice and challenging the Church’s traditional stance. He writes, it

is an attempt to affirm the liberating hand of God ... It affirms the need for the ghetto masses to become co-partners with God in His divine mission of moral, economic, political and social revolution. (Banana 1990, xiv)

In fact, it was after his reinterpretation of the Lord’s Prayer that Banana thought about rewriting the Bible in order to reflect upon his experiences of deprivation under colonialism. He justifies this by saying:

for Christian theology to talk about hope without relating it to the struggle of the oppressed for freedom in history is for it to sanction the structures of oppression, which deprive the oppressed of their dignity. (Banana 1991b, 105)

Banana’s tendency to cross borders is further seen in his book, *Theology of Promise* (1982), where he establishes that religion and politics are seen as representing the temporal and the eternal, yet the “prophetic relevance [comes] from within both religion and politics” (Hallencreutz 1988, 20).

At Zimbabwe’s independence on 18 April 1980, Mugabe’s government prioritised national unity, peace and stability to achieve reconciliation and forgiveness (Banana 1989), culminating in the Unity Accord (1987) after a period of civil strife (1982–1987). However, this effort was short-lived, as the widening gap between the rich elite and the poor commoners necessitated a shift away from socialism (Bakare 1993). In Zimbabwe,

the post-colonial era witnessed a dichotomy in the distribution of resources, with whites receiving preferential treatment, leading to protests and the formation of political parties to challenge white dominance (Bakare 1993). Banana emphasised the importance of guarding against foreign interference and promoting sovereignty (Banana 1996). Despite this, the government's efforts to improve blacks' living conditions were commendable but ultimately unsuccessful, as the post-independent state retained many colonial-era characteristics, including violence, brutality and inequitable resource distribution (Banana 1996). This experience led Banana to develop two theologies, namely: "Combat Theology" and "Ambulance Theology". "Combat Theology" emphasises anthropological and prophetic perspectives, fighting for the welfare of marginalised communities by prioritising people over institutions (Banana 1992). This theology, as advanced by the US Catholic Conference by the 1990s, is also known as "a theology of actionable protest whose fundamental credo is no retreat, no surrender" (Banana 1992, 313), emphasising the use of force to correct grave public evils. Combat Theology represents sacrifice and self-determination (Banana 1992). In contrast, Ambulance Theology is characterised by oppression and maintains class differences by calling for unconditional surrender (Banana 1996). This theology perpetuates dehumanisation and silences the prophetic voice of marginalised communities.

Banana's liberation theology was characterised by revolutionary transformation, which led him to engage in several Christian gatherings. This is best exemplified by his notable speech "The Gospel of Jesus Christ and Revolutionary Transformation" (Banana 1985, 10–21). However, this ideology also created a power imbalance, as he held significant authority as the President of Zimbabwe. Critics argue that Banana's liberation theology was misused, particularly in his handling of religious institutions. For instance, he allegedly abused his power by charging the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) for being neutral or straddling the fence between politics and religion (Kuperus 1999, 654). This dual role allowed Banana to utilise religion as a tool for political gain, blurring the lines between spirituality and state authority. Mujinga (2018) notes that Banana's actions exemplify the tension between the church's role in society and its potential exploitation by political leaders. The failure of the church to make the state accountable and transparent led Banana to cross the line on many occasions as he "genuinely sought to integrate the social implications of his faith with his political responsibilities" (Urbaniak and Manobo 2020, 276). He resultantly crossed borders as a politician, a theologian, a leader, a citizen and a sufferer in his attempt to make both the colonial and the post-colonial government accountable and transparent in their dealings.

Banana and the State

Banana's life was a response to the complex legacies of colonialism and postcolonial oppression. In *Turmoil and Tenacity* (1989) and *The Church and the Struggle for Zimbabwe* (1996), he highlights the experiences of Africans who were forced to work on farms and mines to maintain the comfort of their former white colonisers, with the support of Christian orders. Banana's combat theology, developed during the liberation struggle, continued to apply in this struggle. The Land Apportionment Act of 1930 and

the Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951, which divided land between European and African inhabitants, was a key issue (Bakare 1993, 40ff). Banana's intellectual trajectory was characterised by a critique of both the colonial and postcolonial states. In *Turmoil and Tenacity* (1989), he exposes the victimisation and oppression inflicted upon Africans through legislation, including land laws (Bakare 1993, 40ff). He subsequently called upon the post-colonial state to abandon its autocratic tendencies. Thus, like King's quotable quotes: "If a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live" (King, 15 January 1929 – 4 April 1968), Banana outlines in *Politics of Repression and Resistance* (1992) his advocacy for combative approaches to resistance.

Banana's combative approaches have been criticised because of his ceremonial role as president (1980–1987), although it was crucial for Zimbabwe's transition to independence. Banana used his position to advocate for human rights, social justice and civil activism. He established institutions such as the Student Christian Movement (1980); sponsored the building of the Kushinga-Phikelela Agricultural Institute (1985); and established the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (1989) to investigate and address human rights abuses of the Gukurahundi atrocities (1983–1987). Gukurahundi was supposedly instituted by the government, of which Banana was the President of the state at the time the atrocities happened. In other words, and interestingly so, he established a commission to investigate his role in the atrocities. He crossed the borders of being the head of state, to being an activist.

In fact, Banana has been accorded to be the brains behind the 1987 Unity Accord, because he urged "he urged Mugabe to pursue unity talks with opponents to end violence reported to have killed 20,000 in Matabeleland" (*Washington Post* 2003), thereby laying a foundation for the role of the President in promoting national unity and nationhood. His emphasis on human rights protection, his promotion of democracy, and his encouragement of activism in civil society, was a testament to his commitment to protecting the vulnerable. However, this was despite that his presidency was regarded as weak for he was only ceremonial. This may, however, be disputed in that, upon retirement from office, Banana held regional and international assignments as "OAU Eminent Person for Liberia and Sierra Leone and UN Eminent Person on a Mission to South Africa" (Hallencrutz 1998, 8); and he also "became an Honorary Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy at the University of Zimbabwe" (Chitando 2004, 190). It was, however, his border-crossing antics that made him appear to be a weak president, yet an effective advocate for the needs of the vulnerable. He could use his power and position to franchise the weak.

Challenges in Banana's Presidency

Banana's presidency was marked by challenges in balancing national unity and political tensions. As the first president of Zimbabwe, he faced the difficult task of managing rivalries and factionalism within the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), navigating ideological differences, and addressing socio-economic

challenges. Regarding national unity, Banana's efforts were criticised for being ineffective in resolving internal divisions within ZANU-PF. However, his legacy lies in promoting national unity through dialogue and mutual understanding. As Moyo (2014, 103) notes, "At her birth in 1980 Zimbabwe saw herself trapped by forces of regime change which threatened the existence of the newly born state." Banana's personal and strategic inadequacies therefore have been blamed on his failure to be decisive on the complex root causes of political unrest.

In terms of inclusive governance, Banana strived to overcome differences by actively engaging with all significant groups and accommodating diverse voices. As Ranger (2004, 216) notes, "nationalism as a movement, or set of movements, and as an ideology, remains central to contemporary Zimbabwe and still requires a great deal of rigorous historical questioning". Banana's leadership navigated differences and promoted national unity, as seen in the 1987 Unity Accord.

Regarding socio-economic challenges, Banana navigated a post-independence economy marked by high levels of poverty, unemployment, and other social and economic issues. He established the National Economic Planning Commission in 1981 to develop policies and strategies for economic growth and prosperity. As noted by De Graaf (1987, 9), "whereas an armchair intellectual of rural development ... can afford to oversimplify matters ... a practitioner of rural development ... cannot".

Despite criticisms of his effectiveness in addressing economic challenges, Banana's legacy persists in promoting economic growth and development. His efforts to confront the legacy of segregation and inequality were significant, as noted by Muzenda (2019) and Palmer and Birch (1992). By promoting social justice and equality, Banana addressed the root causes of social and economic inequality. However, "By the end of his life, [unfortunately], Banana was deeply saddened by the disaster that Zimbabwe had become but was powerless to change its fortunes" (Cornwell 2003).

Controversies in Banana's Life

Banana's conviction in a homosexual case that produced overwhelming evidence against the cleric made a strong dent in his life. At that juncture, Banana's

life turned a full circle when he was convicted and jailed for a year for sodomy in 2000. His star had fallen from that of a respected statesman to that of a convicted criminal. (Chitando 2004, 191)

The evidence against Banana on charges of homosexuality and the murder trial of Jefta Dube (his former bodyguard) who shot and killed Patrick Mashiri (another policeman) (Harlow 2002, 210) for taunting him as being "Banana's homosexual wife" (*Mail & Guardian* 1997) were irrefutable. The case was highly publicised in that he had misused his presidential powers for coercing numerous men into accepting his sexual advances at State House (Steyn 2003). Eleven counts of sodomy and other "unnatural acts" that

led to his 18 month incarceration (Zimlegends 2018) were recorded as “several cooks, gardeners, policemen, air force officers, scores of students at the University of Zimbabwe, and most of the President’s football team came forward with similar stories” (Steyn 2003). This drama adds to his border-crossing antics as a church minister, a president, a social activist, but also a homosexual. He was later released on grounds of ill-health (Meldrum 2003; Zimlegends 2018).

However, Banana denied all the allegations as “pathological lies”, and “malicious vendetta”, to destroy his reputation as he was believed to have aimed to join the opposition to unseat Mugabe’s 23-year rule in the 2002 presidential elections, including brokering peace talks between the two political rivals (Meldrum 2003; Zimlegends 2018). Banana castigated homosexuality as “deviant, abominable and wrong” (McNeil 1998). Janet, his wife, also claimed that the charges were politically motivated (Taylor 2002). Although Banana earned a place in Zimbabwe’s history books, this case earned him a controversial footnote; hence, some writers refer to him as Arthur [Art] Penis), driven by his rivals to undermine his presidency (Steyn 2003).

I presume that Banana’s controversy with homosexuality was probably exacerbated by the action of the Methodist Church, to arbitrarily use the court verdict, and it is a high probability that the church acted out of political pressure, to defrock him without independently investigating the circumstances of his accusations in order to uphold justice and transparency in the matter. At his death, the ZANU-PF Politburo in turn, said through Nathan Shamuyarira, the Information Minister of Zimbabwe at the time, said Banana “was a bad example to the youth”, and that “Canaan Banana will be given a state-assisted funeral in his home area befitting a former head of state” but the politburo “could not accord Banana hero status as a matter of principle” (*News24* 2003). Despite this blackspot, Mugabe commented that Banana was “a rare gift to the nation” (Meldrum 2003; Zimlegends 2018) because, “Canaan’s tireless work will not be forgotten by the people he served faithfully” (Zimlegends 2018). This speaks volumes about his consciousness towards a Kairos moment in his border-crossing antics.

As I stated earlier, Banana was born of mixed parentage (Chitando 2004; Gunda 2015; Meldrum 2003), which marked the source of his border-crossing antics (i.e. it began with his natural birth to mixed parentage); his upholding of African culture as the foundation of Christianity without distinguishing Mbuya Nehanda from Abraham; his resignation from the Methodist Church because of its denial of the PCR; his travelling to the US without a passport; his departure from the moderate UANC to the radical ZANU-PF; his entering South Africa through Botswana without a passport; and his potential to join the opposition to end Mugabe’s 23-year rule in 2002. He could easily grab an opportunity to do what was possible, hence his border-crossing antics were perfect for his Kairos consciousness. By crossing both physical and metaphorical borders, Banana sought to break free from all oppressive constraints and questioned hegemony. His actions reflected his desire for autonomy and defiance of the outdated security in colonial borders.

Synthesising Banana's Legacy

The Need to Affirm African Dignity in Global Christianity

As a liberation theologian, Banana struggled with questions of marginality and hegemony in global Christianity. Christianity became Western from the age of the Crusades (1096 C. E. – 1272 C. E.). Banana, former President of Zimbabwe, emerged in a historical context deeply marked by colonialism and the enduring impact of Western Christianity on indigenous cultures. His legacy can be understood through a lens that critiques colonial influences, especially considering the broader implications of the Western interpretation of the Gospel.

Banana's opposition to colonialism was not merely political; it also encompassed a theological dimension. In a context where indigenous peoples, often disregarded and dehumanised under colonial systems, struggled for recognition and dignity, Banana sought to affirm the value and humanity of African identities and experiences. The work of theologians like Bartolome de Las Casas (1474–1566) resonates here, as Banana's activism emphasised the importance of acknowledging the souls and spiritual life of those marginalised by colonialist ideologies. De Las Casas, a contemporary of Christopher Columbus and the first priest to be ordained in the Americas, convinced the Roman Catholic Church that Red Indians had souls. Banana stood against the prevailing view that often equated Western civility with superiority, advocating instead for a recognition of the richness and depth of African cultures and the inherent worth of its people.

Furthermore, the theological schools of thought that emerged in reaction to Western domination – such as Black Theology and African Theology – reflect Banana's vision in promoting a post-colonial, African-centred identity. These theologies assert the need to reclaim indigenous narratives and experiences while also seeking a reconciled understanding of faith that honours African heritages. In many ways, Banana's leadership can be seen as a political manifestation of these spiritual and theological movements, advocating for a society where African identities were celebrated rather than suppressed.

The concept of "*preparation evangelica*", which acknowledges the moral and spiritual significance of all cultures in preparation for the Gospel, aligns closely with Banana's efforts, like Rahner's (1988) anonymous Christians, to uplift indigenous beliefs and practices, suggesting that God's grace operates in diverse contexts, even outside the traditional bounds of Christianity. His presidency worked to cultivate an environment where the voices of the previously marginalised were heard and valued, chipping away at the colonial legacy that had long asserted Western superiority.

It is within this theological groundswell that Banana can be understood when he says, "Religiously speaking, there is no difference between Abraham and Mbuya Nehanda" (Banana 1993, 17–32). Simply, this means that every civilisation has its own Abraham,

its own Moses and Elijah who prepared them to receive the Gospel of Christ. Banana was actively involved in projects, movements, and missions to empower the vulnerable through education and training like his sponsorship of Kushinga/Phikhelela Agricultural Institute among others. When Banana wrote *Come and Share* (1991), he was calling all Zimbabweans to engage the Christian gospel from the locus of their culture, history and heritage lost due to colonialism, as they pursued national development. He appealed for a liberated Christianity that was not captured by Western hegemony, and advocated for a freed African Christianity.

“I Look Upon the World as My Parish” (Banana 1991)

Unlike John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who was banned from the pulpit in the Anglican church for being controversial and radical, Banana decided to resign from the church in protest because of its decision to vote against the PCR. The vote amounted to a defence of and collusion with the white governments that were perpetrating a pernicious racist ideology in the southern African region (i.e. Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Southwest Africa and South Africa). Since 1971, Banana did not therefore have a pulpit nor circuit. Like John Wesley, Banana began to practise his ministry in ways that would for him, redefine “parish”. Masvotore (2023, 5) on Banana believes “the world” can be “translated to the flesh and blood issues of life such as politics, economics and social justice”. No wonder Banana adopted the theology and politics of combating racism in Rhodesia through active politics, and provocative writings (Banana 1989; 1990; 1991b; 1996). Through his writing, he could reach the poor and the oppressed people. Thus, Banana grabbed any Kairos moment and continued his ministry in politics, in the presidency, watching or coaching soccer, and assisting countries at war like Liberia and Sierra Leone (where he was the United Nations eminent person). In all these cases, he acted as an advocate for peace. Throughout the dark days of Zimbabwean civil war, which Mugabe called a “moment of madness” (Maedza 2019, 175–190), as President, Banana “urged Mugabe to pursue unity talks with opponents to end violence reported to have killed 20 000 in Matabeleland” (Campbell 2017; *Washington Post* 2003). This was only possible because Banana found it easy to cross borders. The popular photo of Banana holding hands with Mugabe and Nkomo, with him standing in the middle, is testimony to his astuteness as a negotiator, but also someone who always seized a Kairos moment to cross borders. The legacy of the Unity Accord looms large in the history of Zimbabwe.

Banana Was a Mere Mortal, Not a God

Like any other human being, there were instances where Banana’s poor judgment betrayed him. The call to “rewrite the Bible” was a clear example of poor judgment in his border-crossing antics (Banana 1993). Instead of rewriting, the normative practice is to “re-read”, which, in his case, would have introduced a liberative exegesis that strips Christianity of North Atlantic, patriarchal, and hegemonic heritage. To call for the “re-writing” was not only preposterous and outrageous, coming from a church minister, but it was also a declaration that he had embraced a post-Christian outlook, crossing the

border from an orthodox member of the clergy to a controversial theologian. The abuse of office associated with sodomy and attempted sodomy case for which he was convicted, was his veritable fall from grace. He was sentenced to 10 years in jail, nine of which were suspended. As a result of his criminal conviction, the MCZ defrocked him. I am aware that he pleaded not guilty. Whilst the two cases had dire consequences for his reputation as a church minister and former President, my considered view is that as serious as these cases were, among others, these weaknesses cannot and should not be used to condemn him to the dustbin of history. Banana was not above other mortals. Like other mortals, he was born of a woman, was flesh and blood. His contribution to the Methodist Church globally and to Zimbabwe, and indeed the African continent, cannot be wished away. Doing so would be like throwing out the baby with the bath water.

Banana Was “a Rare Gift to the Nation” (Mugabe 2003)

On hearing about the passing of Banana from cancer, Mugabe described him as “a rare gift to the nation” (Meldrum 2003; Zimlegends 2018). Banana was a bold and courageous leader who did not shy away from asking uncomfortable questions. Communities and nations led by extra careful leaders who fear making mistakes never progress. In literature, there are two types of characters, flat and round. “Flat characters are two dimensional in that they are relatively uncomplicated and do not change throughout the course of a work. By contrast, round characters are complex and undergo development, sometimes sufficiently to surprise the reader” (<https://www.britannica.com>, November 3, 2023). Banana was the latter in the Zimbabwean and global drama, which however, ended tragically. It is incumbent upon flat characters that they can easily grab opportunities and cross borders.

Building Upon Banana’s Enduring Principles

I believe that the legacy of Banana, born out of his history of struggle, is a testament to his unwavering Christian commitment towards justice, equality, human rights, democracy, and freedom (Gunda 2015; Waldron 2017). In this article, I want to state that I emulate Banana’s history of promoting human rights education, democratic governance, and inclusive citizenship (Kuperus 1999). His vision for a more just and equitable society, if it had been maintained, could have helped Zimbabweans to build the foundations of transparency, accountability, and good governance in their country (Ranger 2008).

I further want to acknowledge Banana’s history of promoting peace and reconciliation. Banana supported peaceful initiatives that encouraged dialogue and healing between warring groups (Eppel and Raftopoulos 2008; Tarusarira 2015). I agree with Gunde (2015) that Banana was committed to fostering a culture of tolerance and understanding in Zimbabwean society. He promoted the construction of strong community values and institutions. In fact, I think that tolerance was an essential part for promoting unity and

inclusivity, as well as for working towards a society that respects and celebrates diversity.

Furthermore, Banana's emphasis on good governance and accountable leadership is another critical aspect I think was developed from his history of struggle. Like Ranger (2008), I admire him for putting transparency, anti-corruption, and accountability as important efforts for national development. I think his efforts to promote robust and effective institutions, such as the rule of law, Gunda (2012) avers similar sentiments, are a testament to his commitment to building a more just and equitable society.

Banana finally prioritised access to quality education for all Zimbabweans in the history of a country where blacks did not have access to education (Gunda 2012). He developed this from the history of colonialism that used a bottle-neck system and prioritised whites. This undermined economic growth and job creation, which undermined socio-economic development for the black majority (Chitando, Taringa and Mapuranga 2014; Gunda 2012; Masvotore 2023).

Conclusion

The life and legacy of Professor Canaan Sodindo Banana offer invaluable insights into the intricate nexus between faith, politics and social justice in Zimbabwe. His journey, from a complex upbringing steeped in the influences of African heritage and Christianity to his prominent roles as a church leader, politician and liberation theologian, underscores a transformative narrative that challenged the conventional boundaries of identity and purpose. Banana's defiance of colonial norms and his "border-crossing antics" were not merely acts of rebellion but represented a profound quest for dignity and autonomy, intertwined with his Christian convictions.

Banana's understanding of liberation theology, informed by his encounters with radical ideas during his time in the US, positioned him as a pivotal figure in advocating for justice, equality, and human rights. His emphasis on the visibility of marginalised voices and communities resonates in today's global struggles against systemic oppression. Moreover, his reassessment of African identity in relation to biblical figures reflects a broader movement within Christianity, urging believers to reclaim ownership of their narratives and spaces within faith traditions historically dominated by Western thought.

Despite the controversies surrounding his presidency, including the impact of his alleged personal failings, Banana's contributions to policies promoting peace, reconciliation and social justice cannot be overlooked. His efforts to facilitate dialogue post-independence and to address the socio-economic challenges facing Zimbabweans illustrate a commitment to governance that emphasised unity and inclusion.

As Zimbabweans navigate contemporary challenges in their country and beyond, the principles championed by Banana, such as accountability, transparency and community empowerment, remain relevant touchstones for aspiring leaders and activists. The

lessons drawn from his life compel them to envision a future where faith and activism converge in the relentless pursuit of justice. Ultimately, Banana exemplifies the power of individuals to mobilise the collective towards a vision of societal transformation, urging them to continue advocating for a more equitable and just world grounded in their shared humanity.

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